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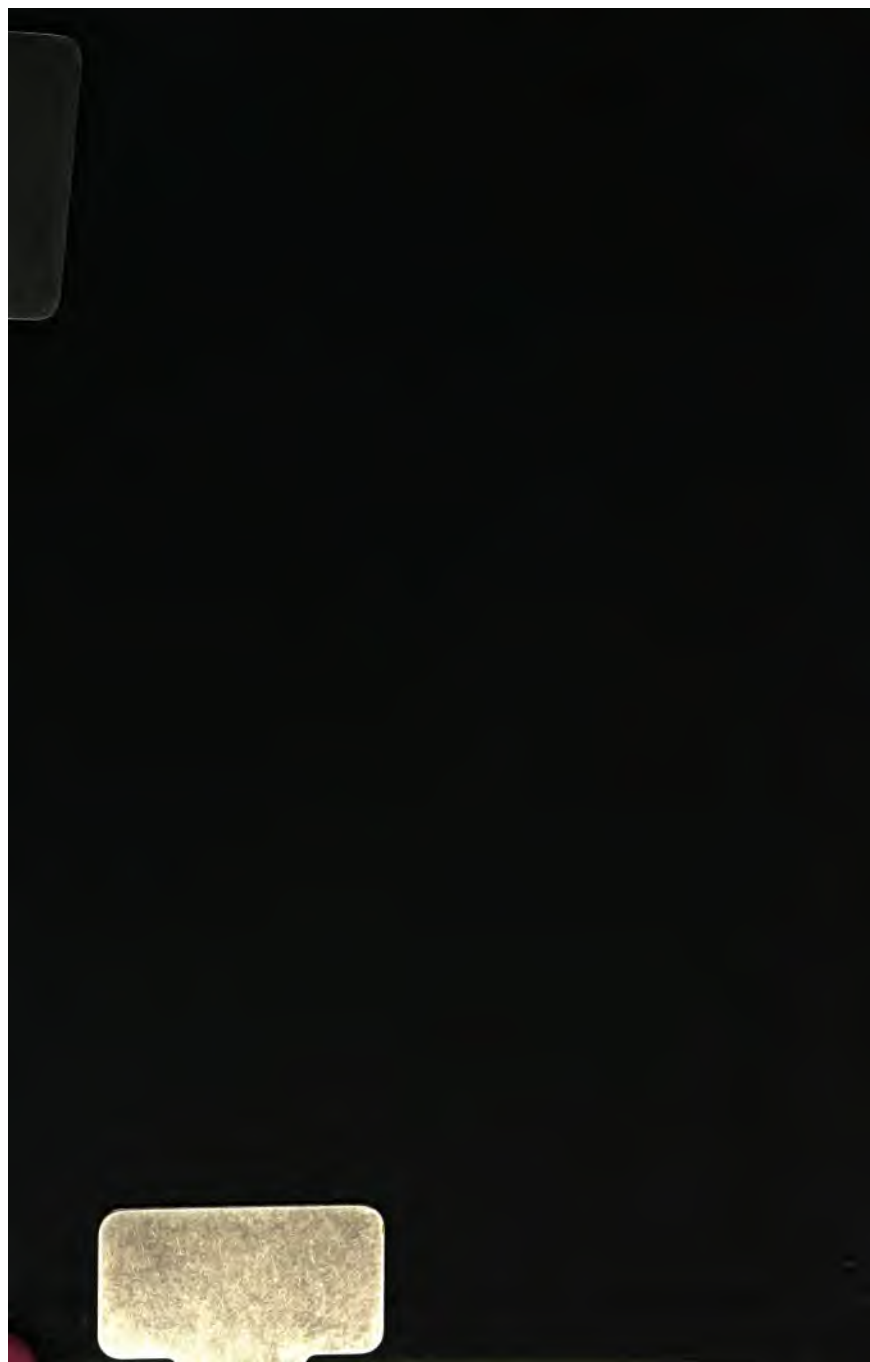
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REMINGTON & CO., New Bond Street, W.

# THE STORY OF MEG.

BY

M. A. CURTOIS.

*Author of "My Best Pupil."*

. . . . Perhaps a young blooming girl, not knowing where to turn for refuge . . . . understanding no more of this life of ours than a foolish lost lamb wandering farther and farther in the nightfall on the lonely heath ; yet tasting the bitterest of life's bitterness.

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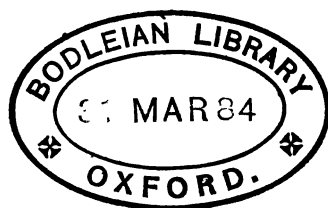
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## CHAPTER I.

Meg sat by her window and thought of Mr. Arlathnot.

Now let no one who reads this imagine that because Meg was at that moment lost in thoughts and fancies, and because Meg sat close up to the window with her blue young eyes full of dreams as they rested on the roofs of London houses, and because Meg was just sixteen, and very pretty, and because the young cheek against her hand was even more soft and dainty than the palm against which it rested, and because the young ripples of her hair could catch even the gleams of London sunlight—let no one, I say, imagine from each or any of these things, that the story of Meg can be, from the very first glance, too easily discovered. We all know, indeed, of the pictures that tell their own stories, or are supposed to do so. The young lady who

sits in dreaming attitude, staring out into the distance, with an open letter in her lap, needs no further description to make clear the state of her mind to our imaginations at once. But then it is to our imaginations—a fact that ought not always to be forgotten; I can well believe that in sober reality a painter might get his idea of such a portrait from a young woman receiving an invitation to a picnic, or considering how best to meet a milliner's bill. Everything depends so much on the manner in which we take it, that is all.

Enough. Meg was scarcely in love with Mr. Arlathnot, whom she knew to be some twenty years at least older than herself, and whom, moreover, she had never in all her life beheld at all, but she sat and dreamt of him notwithstanding.

Down below Meg—far down below—stretched the waste of London roofs, grey with smoke and haze, till they melted far away into the greyer distance beyond. It was such a wide view, that was the beauty

of it, your mind felt quite enlarged in seeing the smoke of so many chimneys at once, and though you had to climb a great many stairs to get to that elevation, you saw more sky when you reached it than you could have done from the rooms below. Besides that, there was one very delightful thing to be seen from there, a distant private garden with trees in it, that through the summer made a square soft spot of green for your eyes to rest upon in the middle of the grey-ness. At night there was another room below from which Meg liked to look, a window from which could be seen lights, and dark roofs, and the spire of a church, and a dome, resting like a massive shadow against the sky : there was a sort of mystery in that. In the day time she liked the waste of smoky greyness, with that one green oasis in the midst of it. At the present moment she was thinking too much of Mr. Arlathnot to be able to see these things at all.

It is an exciting moment, is it not ? when

our trembling hope and faith seem to draw near to their fulfilment at last, and our dream, turning solid, begins to assume a visible shape before our eyes. An exciting, almost a terrible moment—and such a one had come at last to Meg; her sixteen summers, her deep injuries, her dull, hard life, her unkind relations, had not been able to keep this beautiful dream away. Mr. Arlathnot was in the drawing-room below, she scarcely dared to think how soon she would see him; his presence in the house was, for a while at least, enough of happiness for her. All her young timid reverence, her vague unformed ideas of hope and love were in that moment at Mr. Arlathnot's feet. Everything would come right for her now.

Ah! poor, pretty Meg, looking down on the world of London houses, with the youthful ignorant eyes that, in all the world see but their own one lot, and demand for that lot so much, something of a crisis in the narrow circle of your small life had really arrived that day. The dream of years—

even to a child of sixteen—these words mean something after all.

Let me describe her face before I go further; the young, soft, childish outline leaning against the glass, as fair a London sight as one could wish to see that day. If you had asked Meg about herself she would have told you that she was careworn and consumptive, worn with distress, and old with perplexity, a mere wreck of what she once had been. No such terrible signs, however, were visibly traced upon her features then.

It was a soft and dainty wreck that leant against the glass, with no sinking yet in the young outline of its cheek, with no thought of a wrinkle to mar the soft warmth of its complexion. Red as summer cherries, with the sunlight on them, were Meg's pouting lips; she had little dainty curves of shining eyebrows, rough waves of shining hair, and two little tiny ears, that in themselves seemed small perfections. Everything about her had that soft daintiness, that

childish roundness of outline, a very child she looked, only that her great blue eyes, deeper in colour than most one sees, had, in real truth, a curious pathos, as if they were wondering over the trouble they knew. Meg *was* lovely—if you had seen her as she was then on that summer day you could scarcely have helped some love for her.

And, child as she was, smarting under little irritations, and helpless under the very smallness of wrongs, she had no idea of the power that her beauty might be to her, did not know it or take count of it, or understand the value that others might set on it all. No, Meg meant to run away from home, to be a hospital nurse, to die in a consumption, to do all manner of terrible things; no thoughts of a softer lot ever mingled with her dreams—poor orphan child, to whom the great world outside her uncle's home had the fascination the world can still possess for those too young to know with what sort of welcome it greets the wandering lambs who turn towards it for

shelter. Poor Meg, the little heart-throbs beating against her side, had, with the ignorance of sixteen, its blind, passionate impulses too.

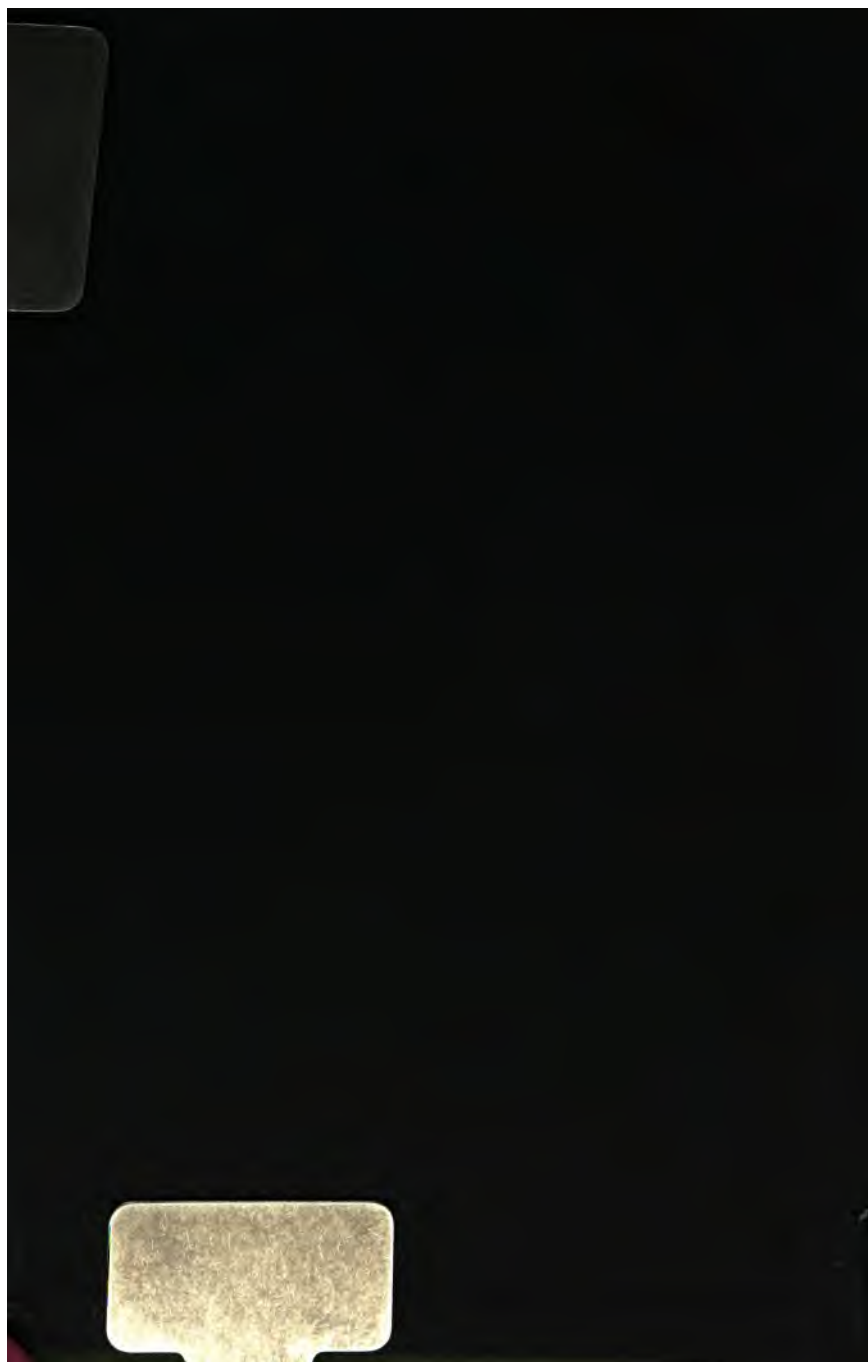
But still with those passionate impulses came Mr. Arlathnot's name—a silent guardian, that stood between her and her perversity.

Who then was Mr. Arlathnot?

Meg looked out on the London houses, thinking of him, and smiled softly as she repeated his name. Shall I be believed when I repeat again that in all her life Meg had never seen Mr. Arlathnot at all: that she knew nothing of his appearance, habits, or manner of living; that he was not related to her, and that she was not even acquainted with any relations of his own? That seems to leave but a small foundation for her trust, but the slenderest trust must be built on something.

Thus much, then, Meg knew—that her dead father, dead eight years ago, had spoken always with changeless affection of one who





Sometimes the handsome son also entered vaguely into her innocent dreams, but he had little to do there; it was of the father always that she thought. For the last year she had been in grievous, aching need of help and counsel; if she had known Mr. Arlathnot's address she would have written to him; now she only waited an opportunity to pour out all her complaints and difficulties in his presence. And then help would come; it had never entered her mind to doubt of that.

If there is one thing more wonderful than another in our passionate ignorant egotism of youth, it is our belief that everyone whom we meet, or of whom we think, must of necessity be interested in us, must wish to know of us, and have a ready sympathy at our service at once. Meg, long determined to take her life into her own hands, and direct its course for herself, as ignorant of the world as any child or doll, looking out now with lovely dreaming eyes upon the mist and smoke over the London houses, was indeed in need of some guidance to check

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## CHAPTER II.

Down below the steep stairs was a large dining-room, with a little back room separated from it by folding doors. This smaller apartment was Mr. Harman's special room whenever he was in town. Here were his great books and portfolios, his favourite square inkstand and squarer table, on which reposed always the enormous desk that held his correspondence for him. No one in all Mr. Harman's domestic circle dared to enter that room, dared even to enter the dining-room when he was there. They would as soon have ventured to disobey his orders or to contradict his assertions.

Mr. Harman was not a literary man—far from it—in spite of the great books that belonged to him; he had been in the oil trade once, and was still well known in the City; but when he chose to enter his unliterary seclusion you might with far less terror have disturbed a poet. And there he remained

always for a great part of the day; even his acquaintances—of whom he had not many—were shown into the drawing-room above, and were not admitted here. On this one occasion, however, it would seem that an exception had been made.

The shutters were drawn in Mr. Harman's room, and a small fire helped still further to keep out the dark chillness of the spring evening. The short heavy lamp upon the table, however, had not been lighted, and the room was almost in gloom. On opposite sides of the fire sat two men—silent both—one short, stout, bolt upright, stroking his coarse, short, grizzled beard with his hand; the other in a low chair, with his long legs stretched out, his elbow on the chair's arm, and his head resting on his hand and turned towards the wall. So sitting, both remained motionless and silent for a while.

"It seems to me," said the shorter man, breaking the pause, in a hard yet anxious tone, "that you give up all hope a great deal too easily."

"I cannot give up what I have never had."

After a pause —

"The ship has gone down; there is no doubt of that. I never had any from the first, but it would be only useless torture to go on hoping now."

Perhaps the first speaker himself had that opinion also, for he attempted no reply. He sat with his hand resting on his beard, looking at the other, who lay quite still, with his face turned away towards the wall. So for two minutes the firelight shone on them both.

"What are you going to do, Arlathnot?" he asked then, with a sharp hard voice.

The other moved his head a little, but still did not reply for a while.

"Do?" he repeated absently, without stirring now.

"If you have no hope, as you say, why do you stay on up here in London, instead of going to your home as you meant to do?"

"I don't know; I can't help it," the other

replied, and with a groan he drew the long lean fingers on which his face rested over his eyes, as if even the faint light of the fire was too strong for them. With his eyes hidden in this manner he went on speaking in a low, broken voice, and without turning his head, "I can't bear the noises in the streets, and yet I must go walking on in them all day. I can't keep myself still. I wish you could help me."

Mr. Harman, surprised, gave an uneasy twitch that moved him for an instant in his seat. To anyone such a confession might indeed have seemed serious enough, but he was resolute and hard by nature, and I doubt whether in most cases he would have paid any attention to it at all. This man, however, had been his friend through all his life, and in all his life he had never known him speak of his innermost feelings before. He had known him close, reserved, self-contained, almost superciliously averse to sympathy for any trouble of his own. Some sort of revolution must have taken place



for such words to have been possible from him.

Mr. Harman looked at him with a real anxiety stirring the hard brow that had learnt its wrinkles more in cares for the oil business than for his home; he was not a man given to prayer except under due limits at stated seasons, but something like a mental wish for aid did escape him then. He changed the name by which he had addressed his companion when he spoke, but there was no other tenderness to be discovered in his words.

"I should have thought, Phil," he said harshly, "that you would have known how to help yourself."

"That is so easy always, of course," replied the other, raising and turning himself a little now, however, so that the firelight shone on his thin and nervous face. He went on in a voice that had too much of passionate entreaty in it to be able to raise itself above the lowest whisper that could be audible in the silence. "Speak to me; blame

me ; say all the fault was mine ; that will do most good to me."

Mr. Harman drew his eyebrows together as if in surprise or contempt, and then spoke—more resolutely still.

"If you wish for that sort of thing," he said, "I can give you plenty of that. I always said your indulgence would be fatal to him."

"Yes, yes."

"You seem pleased at that."

"I don't want to blame him"—with a sigh that was almost a groan—"I want to take all the fault upon myself. God knows I would willingly bear any punishment for him in this world or the next."

"You do not talk like a Christian, Arlath-not."

"I feel like a heathen."

After a pause —

"Not quite that, thank God, but God only can know what these last few weeks have been to me. . . . If I could have known at once . . . but to wait for weeks like

this . . . and yet feel sure . . . and even now sometimes I can scarcely believe it yet."

Again silence, whilst the glimmering fire-light, moving and trembling in the darkness, was like almost visible presences in the room with them.

"You're a great fool, Arlathnot," burst out Mr. Harman then; thrusting his hands deeply into his pockets as he spoke. "I wouldn't speak so plainly to anyone but you, and I would not to you if you did not force me to it." (Though what the force had been he did not think it necessary to say.) "You were quite right in what you said before; it's no good indulging in any sort of doubtfulness now, you had much better make up your mind to the worst at once. If I were in your position, and had gone through all that you have done with him" —

And here he stopped.

"Well."

"It's easy to say, you know, and yet, unless you really wish to hear, you see" —

“I do wish it.”

“Well, then—then”—with an effort that rather belied his words—“if you want to hear, you know—hang it, if I were in your position now I should say my son had not been such a wonderful pleasure to me whilst he lived that I should break my heart because he was saved from worse so early.”

Silence.

“And you think that helps me?” cried the father, with a sudden passionate movement, covering his face with his hands. He sat bent forwards with his head sinking towards his knees, then, rousing himself with an effort, he drew himself up, looking round with a sickly and half-bewildered smile, letting his hand rest for a moment on his forehead, and then holding it a little away from his face, and looking at it as if he were not quite certain to whom it belonged. That mood passed as he let it fall at last, and his features changed slowly as if some veil were passing from them, to the grave, quiet lines of a stern and melancholy reserve. Only the hands that rested

on his knee, loosely folded as they were, had that look of curious tension in skin and muscle that can make even these voiceless members seem as plain in their suffering as if they were cries for help. The firelight had sunk to a faint red glow, and there was almost darkness in the room.

Mr. Harman roused himself. Clearly there was need of some exertion somewhere. He put a large coal on the fire, and broke it standing in front of it, and dealing fierce, successive, and far from silent thrusts. Then he lit the lamp, induced, perhaps, to do this by the contraction of the brows with which his friend greeted the sudden light of the starting flames. He lit it, stood watching the light with his hands against his hips, put a large green shade over it, then turned reluctantly, and sat down once more. He was a short, hard, compressed-looking man, whose lines of nose and beard, rather handsome as they were, fell into stiff outlines, and whose very dark grey coat had something uncompromising in the look of it. Yet it may be

that, in his way, he felt some real trouble then. He sat with his hands in his pockets, staring into the fire, without turning his eyes towards the other face now. The lamp did not burn well, he got up with a subdued exclamation, and turning it out impatiently, left the room to the doubtful gleams of fire-light again. Perhaps that subdued darkness gave him courage, for he spoke at once as soon as he had sat down once more.

"You owe it to yourself, Philip," he said, "to make an effort, and rouse yourself, you know. Have something to eat, or some brandy, or something—you must get the better of this in time."

Mr. Arlathnot turned the stern gravity of his face slowly towards him, but did not answer for an instant.

"Get the better of it?" he said quietly, as if he were considering. "Well, I suppose I may—I don't know about that. No, thanks, I don't care to eat anything. I can scarcely eat a mouthful now—this sick strangled feeling—and if I could only rest—but I must go on and on in the streets" —

It was curious to observe that his face, so quiet when he began, changed rapidly to haggardness during the instants whilst he spoke.

"By —— you'll have a fever," said Mr. Harman.

"I don't know; I know only that it is all too strong for me."

Again silence, whilst the older man, who had risen, favoured now by the gloom, was able to turn a hard, direct gaze to the bent face on which the changing gleams of the fire-light fell. His next words came with some hesitation, as if they touched a topic on which he did not care to dwell; possibly he was getting towards the limits of his resources now.

"I should have thought," he said, "that your religious feelings—the consolation you have so often given to others" — And here he stopped. His words were not without their effect; Mr. Arlathnot raised himself quickly, and spoke with haste, and almost with excitement.

"Ah, you have reached that," he said, "I knew you would come to that before you had done. Very well, then. I am not

ashamed to own as much as that. It has come near me and I *have* fainted : it has touched me and I *am* troubled. . . . And if it was all hypocrisy . . . it is so hard to tell. . . . What is that ?” And suddenly he stopped.

The little soft tap at the door had startled the other man too ; in certain states of mind the smallest sound can do that for us. They were both silent in the darkness for an instant.

The door opened an inch.

“ It’s only me,” said a soft, ungrammatical voice. It opened still further, and there on the threshold stood Meg.

Oh, childish loveliness, so fair and soft in your completeness, so untouched to outward view by care or trouble, how strange you seemed at that moment to those on whom you came. The light of the candle she carried was on her face, on one side of her forehead she had slightly pushed back her fair bright hair with a little nervous movement before she knocked, her great pathetic blue eyes



were opened wide with childish shyness, and a childish excitement made a still softer colour rise slowly in her cheeks. Perhaps Mr. Harman was glad of any diversion from a painful scene; perhaps the sight of her beauty, to which he had never paid much heed before, came over him all at once as a sort of power that he might make use of now. Certainly his greeting, far from cordial as it was, was not the peremptory dismissal she was accustomed to expect.

"Oh, it is you; have you brought the paper?" he said. "We are all in the dark here. Come in and put your candle on the table." Then turning to his friend—"This is poor Dick's child, you know."

"Ah!—yes."

Mr. Arlathnot had risen with unconscious, courtesy, for he seemed scarcely to know that anyone else was present in the room. Meg, standing by the candle which she had placed upon the table, stole a timid glance at the tall, lank gentleman by the mantelpiece; her heart was beating fast already with her own

unformed hopes, but that first glance affected her with an interest in which for the moment her own personal fancies were forgotten : so strange appeared the face on which she looked—thin, worn, nervous—with something in the expression that suggested thoughts of what is kind and noble, but with blank, fixed eyes that had no attention and no sight for her. Her heart that had seemed to stop for an instant whilst that glance was taken, began to beat once more, with great foolish throbs now, as if it would choke her breath.

“Poor Dick’s child—you remember?” asked Mr. Harman, in a hard and persistent way.

“Ah, yes—yes—I forget so many things now.”

Meg’s cheeks grew scarlet, the sudden vivid colour quite altering her face, but no one paid any heed to her.

She stood still by the table.

“You may go away. Why are you waiting?” asked her uncle, who saw that his scheme had failed. “Leave the candle here. Or stop,” though she had not moved, “just

reach me down that Quarterly from the top shelf and then go. We had rather be alone."

Still Meg stood, trembling a little as if she were cold. That strange, hot colour had gone as suddenly as it had come, and she was rather pale, for she was making a great effort over herself, a sudden burning feeling behind her eyes having warned her that she might be going to cry. She moved at last in a distressed sort of way, and went to the tall book-case that stood in the recess on the opposite side of the fireplace to that on which the tall strange gentleman was standing, and then turned to get a chair, for the top shelf was beyond her power to reach. Mr. Arlathnot saw, and roused himself instinctively at once.

"You will allow me," he said, and, crossing the rug quickly, he reached down the book and put it into her hand, the action seeming so natural to him that it could scarcely move his mental stupor at all. Going back to his old position, he stood leaning against the wall as if he were half asleep or lost in

thought. Meg put down the Quarterly on the table, looked in a distressed, enquiring manner towards her uncle for commands, then turned to go.

"Say good-night to Mr. Arlathnot," commanded Mr. Harman at once.

She hesitated a moment as if the task were painful to her, and then, going up to him, put out her hand. Looking down as he took it, his glance met her fair, upturned face, her great blue eyes and childish trembling lips, moved now as if by some silent appeal to him.

What moved him in that moment perhaps even he himself could scarcely have told. Some remembrance it may have been of the dead friend of long-past days coming vaguely across the confusion of his mind, or some dim sense of the nearness of another's trouble, or some still more dim feeling as if he himself had been guilty of some hardness or neglect. He held her hand, and as he did so words seemed to rise strangely to his mind, almost to his lips, as if some force

were impelling him to speak; "I have just had a great trouble." The natural reserve of the man checked them; he let her hand drop and turned his face away.

Those few words might have changed Meg's story.

### CHAPTER III.

It was agreed amongst all the servants that Miss Anna was the beauty.

Perhaps Miss Anna thought so herself; certainly the effect of her charms was much increased by the stateliness of her demeanour.

"She do carry her head like a princess," said the cook; "the gentleman as owns her 'ill have his silk dresses to pay for."

"And won't he be an happy gentleman, neither," observed the footman, it was supposed satirically, for Miss Anna had her own ideas as to the way in which a household should be managed.

In spite of these, however, a certain household pride and spirit, very common even under unfavourable circumstances, made the domestics generally take a great interest in her appearance, crowding together in dark places that they might see her as she walked

downstairs in silk and jewels, with a candle carried in front of her, to an evening party.

"If it was Miss Meg now," they whispered sometimes, but that was the only unfavourable comment they dared to make.

And it may be that some echo of the same thought, however little owned to or believed in, was present also to Anna Harman's mind.

"I suppose," she said to her sisters, "that Meg, who is only a dependent, will not expect when she comes out to go to as many parties as we do."

Her sisters entirely agreed with her; at least they were of one mind as to the justice of the matter, whatever Meg's expectations might chance to be.

Anna Harman was a tall, fine girl, with black hair and regular features, much like her father in disposition, save that she possessed, naturally, some womanly qualities (such, perhaps, as a slight infusion of spite), from which his nature was free. She had, or imagined herself to have, a strong sense

of justice. She had a cold, hard head; she had been brought up to understand what was due to herself and to claim it too. It is not from such as these that those who are only dependents need have much hope of mercy.

How did Meg come to occupy that unfavourable position in the Harman family?

Mr. Harman was the younger son of a gentleman, who had two sons, an income much smaller than his ancestors had possessed, and a small estate in the country. It had its relics of past splendours, that small estate, a great, grey, rambling house, too large for the meagre amount of land on which it looked, shadowed without by ancestral beech trees, and gloomy within with great portraits of forgotten forefathers. There were no less than four of these ladies in stiff dresses in the dining-room, and one gentleman leaning with his hand upon his sword, all fair-haired and slender, with large eyes and pouting lips, a delicate, passionate style of beauty, that had much of the looks of Meg.



Mr. Richard Harman had two sons, as I have said : the eldest handsome, idle, and extravagant ; the younger economical, hard-working, and steady. It will be easily understood that he preferred the first, and left to him all the fortune he had been able with toil and care to save ; the younger, who had claimed his own small portion of money long before, having settled himself in London in a merchant's office, where he lived in seclusion without troubling his relatives at all. The hard-working Edward was not much approved of by these, and it was generally supposed that the father had chosen his favourite well—a choice, however, to which circumstances brought a strange result, for in a very few years the handsome Dick contrived to sell his estate, to break his wife's heart, to run through the rest of his money, and to drink himself to death. The younger son, now far advanced on the road to wealth, attended his brother's death-bed, saw to the funeral, and took the orphan penniless child to be educated with his own daughters in his home.

Mr. Harman's house was in the depths of the country, a large old mansion of red brick, whose rich deepness of colour made a fine background to snow-sparkles in the winter time, or to the delicate contrast against it of Gloire de Dijon roses and white starlike creeper flowers in the summer. Great limes were round it, branching horse-chestnuts, and thorn trees like fallen masses of snow when springtime came; you could scarcely see the house for the trees. It was very lonely, and the distant neighbours did not come near it much; you could walk in the garden-paths all day, and still be solitary. Alone of all the family Meg loved the place, loved the little peeps of red where the house showed between the branches of the trees, loved the dark garden-walks, the flash of the stream below the meadow with the long grass where the thorn trees grew, the great terrace where hollyhocks and dahlias reared their heads. She was young enough to be connected with unconscious links to the childish time

when she sat with her doll on the grass, or gathered cowslips in the meadow, that dreaming, indescribable sense of enchantment was over all things still for her. Already her childish ideal of life was formed: her cousins should marry, her uncle should live in London, and she should be left to live in the old house and gardens alone. Meanwhile the rest of the family were far from sharing her feelings; the girls found the place dull, even the servants complained, and the master and father had no affection for the spot.

Perhaps it would have been well for Mr. Harman if he could have forgotten his early years, for the memory brought little else but bitterness to him. He did not regret his own hard-working life, he was proud of himself for the money he had won, and yet it was to him a never-ceasing source of vexation that the difference in age of less than a year should have denied to him the advantages that his brother had lost. In the depth of his heart was something that yearned still for the grey house with the smooth-leaved

beech trees round it, and the carved mantel-piece in the dining room, over which the young fair-haired cavalier leant so gracefully upon his sword, for the family inheritance of books, and pictures, and curiosities, handed down from one to another as generations passed, the goblet his ancestors had touched, the Cremona violin on which his grandmother had played. All lost, scattered, sold, the garden altered, the house pulled down, and a sort of magnified villa built where it had been—he could not bear to think of that. He had been ill at the time, and away from England, and he was not so wealthy then, even if he had known he would have had little power to help. Lost, sold: there was no good in thinking of it now. But a bitterness for all these things lingered for him in the remembrance of the brother through whom the ruin had come, and touched with that memory of old times the face of Meg. She at least had no family goods to lose; nothing depended on her but the one little life and soul for which no one cared enough to fear.

I suppose the uncle intended to do his duty by his niece. His own girls were older, and so were not able to learn with her; but their teachers had given a certain amount of education to her—a little history and grammar, a little French and music, a few notions of dancing and drawing, nothing completed or regularly taught, but a few scattered ideas that suited her indolent, childish nature well. These were thought enough for her, it was not necessary for her to attain to the accomplishments of the rest. Meg was not like the rest; she was idle, and passionate, and foolishly sensitive; their cleverness and talents, gained by care and labour, had no rivalry from her. She was a strange creature in that quiet house; her fits of sudden anger made the only outbursts, her frequent punishments a sort of amusement to the others, only it seemed hard to them that they should have to bear so much from her. Anna was handsome, and played well, and had talked French with foreigners; Binia had made friends with an earl's daughter at school,

and might get into *society* some day ; Kittie was a wit in a small way, and made unpleasant remarks on their neighbours. They were all complete in themselves, and satisfied with each other ; what did they want with Meg ?

And so as years went on, and Meg grew older and very pretty, and might soon be thinking of going to parties with them, they become more disposed to be rather unkind to her. It did not even occur to them to think how much they hurt her, probably they did not know ; her helpless resentment was rather amusing than otherwise to them. They made their own small circle, and left her to be alone. Meg, a foolish, wild, untamed creature, with a young, ceaseless craving for affection, though as yet with no desire for power, was united by no sympathy with them. The dull house in London was a change of scene to the great dark red mansion and lonely garden walks at home, but it brought little other difference to her life. Meg felt very lonely, hurt and

angry too, consumed with great desires and foolish dreams of rushing away from this cold hardness and intolerable unkindness into the great wonderful world outside and winning a fortune for herself. They would admire her then.

Certainly it spoke well for her childish heart, though it was not perhaps equally to the credit of her pretty head, that she had no idea of the sort of admiration that in a few years might easily be hers, of a power almost even now possessed, by means of which she might soon know how to return slights, and give back taunts with interest. Meg had dreams about her talents; she had no means of comparing her education with that of others, and her scraps of French and music were very wonderful to her. Of her beauty she knew nothing; she liked her face sometimes, and thought herself very wicked, because she felt sometimes that she was pretty, and that was all. She too used to stand with the servants, or in a little dark corner by herself, and watch Anna Harman

with wondering, admiring awe as she went down in her silk and jewels, with a candle carried in front of her. She did not know the effect that might have been produced on Anna Harman's partners by the blue eyes with which she looked.

So she lived, lost in dreams, and folly, and resentment, suffering a great deal, as children can often suffer when none suspect or care, and yet ready always to break from these despairs into the loveliest childish gaiety, into snatches of singing, and rippling smiles and laughter that made young life and music in the house. An April life, with soft rain and glancing sunshine, and sudden storms; a young morning of existence that with the best intentions had not been able to spoil itself—as yet.

Only in this, as so often elsewhere, who, out of the whole wide world should be the sister's "keepers." Why should the Misses Harman feel themselves called upon to take care for Meg?





Meg lay on her bed and cried.

Outside, beyond the still uncurtained window, the night had fallen over the great city, and from every side lights shone far out in the distance against the sky. Dark chimneys and outlines of houses were dimly seen, here and there a window where a blind had not been drawn (the people of London not being too particular as to that), showed light and warmth within. Meg had looked out on the houses before she threw herself down, but the wide darkness had brought no comfort to her ; it was with her own lot that she was always occupied, and that lot seemed to fill her heart even to bursting now.

Her uncle did not care for her, her cousins had told her only that day that she owed all she had to them, she had no friends or home, and Mr. Arlathnot . . . had forgotten !

Deep sobs came, choking her breath, blinding her eyes, and wetting the tangled hair between her face and the pillow. It seemed so cruel that he should forget ; her father had cared for him, and she was like her

father—the dead friend of former years, and he had not cared for that. No one cared. She would never believe in that again.

Still Meg sobbed, her face pressed hard into the pillow, as if her trouble could find relief in that; and, indeed, the still position, the coolness, and the darkness were pleasant, she had so trembled with excitement all the day. Only it was something like the quietness of despair; she could not think how to rise and go on with her life again—a poor sobbing, shivering thing, she lay in the darkness, and was miserable. Let no one call her absurd; to a childish nature the loss of an ideal is a trial before which the whole faith of life itself must waver—for a while at least there is no escaping that. And she had been reproved by her uncle that morning, and had quarrelled with her cousins, there seemed no comfort left. Only tears and sobs, especially when they come on in storms, are not things that can last for ever. Tired and sick with crying, she rose from her bed and sat by the

window once more, looking out on the dark world below, listening with the tension of feeling that excitement can give to the sound of a carriage that came down a street, turned a corner, and passed, invisible from where she sat. Her mind, released for a while from Mr. Arlathnot, had gone back to her cousins again. They had called her a charity child and their dependent, had they?

Meg got up and paced the room, her cheeks aflame in the darkness with her quick perilous excitement, her little hands clenched, with the nails pressed hard into their dainty palms. So she was their dependent, was she, who took their money and lived on them? And they had not let her go to any concerts, nor to the Academy even, and she had to stay at home when they went out, and she *hated* them—and then came tears again. And then all at once, stopping her crying, and with an odd, triumphant smile, she went to the side of the room where her bed was, and knelt down on the floor. By the side of her bed was a little black trunk;

feeling in the darkness she found it, and found the key, kept always in the purse that was in her pocket. Down in the depths of her trunk was another purse; she took that out, and went to the window to look. Certainly it was not easy to see in the darkness, that treasure, but it lay on her hand, and she could feel it as she stood. Five golden sovereigns! It almost took away Meg's breath to think of these.

Oh, it would take me too long to tell through how many small gifts, by the help of how many small savings and contrivances, that wealth had come. For the last two years Meg had vigorously saved every penny that was bestowed upon her that it might be hidden here, had denied herself chocolate, and had been stingy about nuts. It had been a proud morning for her, nearly a year ago, when, with a beating heart, she had first persuaded old Susan, the family housemaid and slave, to turn her shillings and sixpences into gold, the first gold that ever her life had known. Since that glad morning four more

pounds had come. Oh, it was quite wonderful even to think of that—she would soon be wealthy now. For to Meg's financial mind, so experienced already in its calculations, those five pounds meant deliverance indeed. Already she had a large sum on which to live; it would take a long while before five pounds were done. Only she would be wise and wait, and save a great, great deal, and then some day—vague and bright were the visions of what was to happen when that some day came; she only knew that they included a departure in triumph from her uncle's home, and a general mortification of all her relations in the house. They would know her then. And then, suddenly, a better, and more gentle and childlike feeling checked the tide of dreams, and she threw herself, face downwards, upon the bed.

“I would never wish to leave them,” she sobbed, “if only one of them would be kind to me.”



"Where is Meg?" asked Mr. Harman, about half an hour later that evening.

The lamp was lit in the dining-room, there was a look of solid silver and comfort about the dinner—an appearance that seemed reflected in the solid aspect of the master of the house, and in the evening dresses of the three young ladies who were present at the table. Mr. Harman, however, had been sitting silent, as was usual with him, even sometimes when visitors were present, and his face, always hard and still, had a pale, worn look that, perhaps, his last visitor had left there. Therefore it was something of a surprise to his daughters when he suddenly lifted his hard, dark, steady eyes, and spoke; and they hastened to answer with an eagerness which seemed more born of fear than of affection.

"How can we tell?" answered the two eldest Misses Harman together. "How is it possible ever to account for Meg?"

"I wish she would learn to be punctual at meals, at any rate," said Mr. Harman, with

a darkening forehead. "I must speak to her."

And he relapsed into silence again.

"Did I not tell you so?" whispered Miss Kittie to Miss Binia, by whom she sat.

And then they were silent, too, for their father, whatever other education he had given them, had taught them, at any rate, to respect his moods. Besides, those five words had meant a hope as to which no more open expression could be made.

For the Misses Harman, after their grand quarrel with Meg in the morning, had received three tickets for an evening concert to which they were to be escorted by a friend; and as their cousin had not been out with them at all in London that year, and as a rash promise had been made that she should have a part in the next festivity that fell to the share of the family, it followed, therefore, that one of the said tickets belonged in due course to her. Now this seemed hard to Miss Binia, on whom it entailed the unpleasant necessity of spend-

ing a dull and lonely evening in the drawing-room at home, more especially since her sisters would much have preferred her for a companion of the two. One hope remained—Meg had a natural tendency always to fall into disgrace, and this might lead to a reversal of positions yet. With this end in view, and for a joke, as they said, they had not thought proper to inform their cousin of the pleasure in store for her, so that there might be no fear of her hypocritically assuming her best behaviour for the occasion. Now she was late for dinner, their father was angry, it might all turn out yet as they desired.

Good fun Kittie called this watching and waiting, and to do her justice it appeared in no other light to her. Kittie Harman was eighteen, slim, shrewd-faced, and fair-haired, with a sort of brightness about her, though the lamplight, shining on her face, found in her eyes rather a sharp twinkle than a glow. She wore a simple white muslin with only a narrow gold chain round her neck, for she was the youngest of the three.



Binia was a year older, and had already begun to fear herself old for matrimony, it would have been such a triumph to have been wedded at seventeen. Binia was something like her father, and very ugly (which he was not), with a flatness about her looks, for she was low and broad in figure, and had a notably low forehead, ornamented beneath with black, thick, enormous eyebrows that were somewhat startling to behold, more especially since her high, broad cheek bones seemed on their way towards them, and scarcely allowed fair space or play for the eyes between. Binia was not good-looking as her sister Anna was, nor witty as her sister Kittie attempted to be, and it was, therefore, to be feared that in spite of a somewhat surly temper she might not be able to hold her own between the two. But, as I have said, she had contrived to make friends with an earl's daughter at school, and ever since that time it was said that she had such good manners, and her credit had gone up to a very high extent at home. For homes, like other places, need credentials.

These, then, were the three. Binia sat by Kittie, and on the side of Anna was the vacant place.

Soup—a very good hot, clear soup—was nearly done, when the door softly opened, and Meg came in, and took her place without a word. She was in white muslin, like Kittie, only without the gold chain; her fair hair was rough, and she looked rather as if she had dressed in haste; also her eyelids were red as if she had been crying. Binia and Kittie looked at each other. They knew well that flushed, feverish look on their young cousin's face—it meant that Meg was in one of her excited moods, and ripe for scrapes—but they exchanged their glances in silence.

Meg also sat in silence at the table, with her eyes cast down, and declined soup with a gesture, hoping to escape from further comment thus. But she was not to be let off so easily. Mr. Harman had not seemed to notice her entrance, and helped the fish without a word; then he looked at her, his dark,

severe glance having as much sternness as his voice.

"What do you mean, Meg," he asked, "by coming in so late?"

No answer. Meg sat with drooping head, trembling rather, and clasping her little hands beneath the table cloth, for she knew that her eyes were burning, and was afraid that she would cry. The footman seemed concerned, and handed her the sauce. Mr. Harman waited an instant to give greater effect to his words, then spoke again —

"If you are absolutely unable," he said, "to be ready at the right time for meals, I wish you would do us the kindness of absenting yourself altogether. We are not so very fond of your society that we cannot dispense with it in preference to being disturbed like this."

No answer.

"Do you hear? Look at me."

Meg raised her head, and two large tears fell into the sauce on her plate.

Mr. Harman muttered "baby," and said

no more. He had not been a particularly admiring father to his own babies, so, no doubt, the word had no tender associations for him.

Again silence, in which all ate their fish. There was not always this quietness after a reproof, and Binia's hopes began to fall. Meg seemed, indeed, much more submissive than usual, but the calmness was but outward show; she had suffered to-day from more than wounded affection, and the first instinct of hurt pride is always to be still: Mr. Arlathnot had forgotten.

The fish was removed, and the meat was carved—in silence still. Then Anna, unwitting, it must be said, what she did, gave the first signal for Binia's hopes to rise. It was a very little thing: she was fond of dates, and liked to speak of them now and then, for in other things her sisters were more clever than herself.

"I know," she said, "what day it is to-day."

The rest raised their faces with a languid

interest as she spoke. The dinner had been so dull, broken only by that one little incident, even Anna's dates could now be a relief. Miss Harman observed that she had gained the attention of her audience, and went on with pride —

"It was on to-day eight years," she said, "that Meg came here."

Silence. Meg had raised her face also like the others, and a quick flush had spread over it as she heard her name. In the pause that followed she hung down her head, whilst her heart began to beat with the foolish fastness of a sudden longing.

"Oh, if anyone would say anything kind to me now I would love that one for ever."

Still silence.

"We *did* gain a treasure," said Kittie then, in a little incisive sort of way.

"I don't know," went on Binia in her slower, quieter voice, "how we contrived to exist at all before."

"You are all hateful," flamed out Meg. "I hate you all. I wish I were dead. I wish I had never come to your house at all."

"Do you hear, father," asked Binia, "what Meg is saying?"

"I wish I were dead," said Meg.

"*Will* you be quiet?" thundered Mr. M. Harman, with such fearful and even unusual severity that the very footmen trembled in their shoes and clattered the dishes that they held. "Do you know at all," he went on, "what foolish and wicked words you say? Where do you think you would go to if you were to die just now?"

The Misses Harman, drawing themselves up with great demureness, seemed decidedly to know.

"Leave the room," said their father, "and go to your own. You are not fit to be in the company of any sensible people now. And remember this," as she rose, "for one week at least you are not to go out with us."

"I don't care," said Meg. "I don't want to go anywhere with any of you."

"Very well," replied Mr. Harman; "now you will not go out at all."

Slowly and with faltering footsteps Meg crossed the room. At the door she paused,

and looked back towards the rest. Binia had leant across Kittie, and was speaking with slow but intense eagerness to Mr. Harman.

"Father," she said, "would it not be a good thing for me to go and put on my best dress for the concert now?"

That was enough. Meg closed the door and rushed upstairs, in such an agony of shame, anger, and hopelessness as perhaps only the very young can feel. So that was all they cared for! They had no pity for her in her disgrace; they had no thought of giving help to her in her trouble; all they wished for was to gain one concert more.

She was still lying face downwards on her bed in the dark, about twenty minutes later, when the door softly opened, and Anna Harman put her face into the room.

"Meg," she said, "I have taken the fancy father gave you. I thought you would not mind; and, you know, you will not be wanting it for a long while now."

Meg sprang up, but Miss Harman had prudently retreated and joined her sisters on

the stairs. Immediately afterwards she heard the carriage drive away.

They made quite a grand appearance in the concert-room that evening, Mr. Harman's daughters — well-dressed, handsome-looking girls, agreeable, sensible, and surrounded with friends, both ladies and gentlemen, they attracted a good deal of notice in the fashionable guinea seats in which they sat. Indeed, these might be described as quite the right sort of young ladies : well-dowered, well-educated, well-mannered, assisted by rich relations, highly accomplished, moving in good society, with a pleasant choice of partners now, probably to have a pleasant choice of husbands in the years to come — certain thus, as it seemed, of success in this world, and therefore, doubtless, certain also of equal advantages in the next — young ladies to be desired were these. Nevertheless, and in spite of these things, it must be owned, that to poor, foolish, passionate Meg a nest of scorpions might have been somewhat less stinging company.



## CHAPTER IV.

It has been often said that there is no hopelessness like that of youth; trouble seems to us so endless then, our affection is so easily hurt, our anger has so keen a tooth with which to gnaw us, the delirium of disappointment gains possession of us so entirely and so soon. We have no power to think, and have had no experience to tell, that at the very worst there must in time come some change in life—the people, the circumstances that surround us, seem always to close us in for ever. So, at least, it seemed to Meg, and to her unreasoning impulses the dreary waste of years before her seemed too hard to bear.

And yet, even whilst she thought in this manner, there was being prepared from the most unexpected quarter a new home for her. But before we can know of that we must know something more of one of whom we have had but a distorted view as yet.

And certainly, in this instance, if the description have no charm at all the fault must be entirely mine. For no such barren impression could be left even upon those who had but a slight acquaintance with Mr. Arlathnot.

To begin, then, at the beginning. Philip Arlathnot, an individual of great note in his own circles, as many are who are not otherwise known to fame, was, at the time we speak of, about forty-three, a not-too-old, therefore, and still very handsome widower, well-known as an active supporter of many charitable societies, as an attendant at many boards and meetings, as a most lavish subscriber to all sorts of distressed circumstances and cases, a very ardent speaker—and, to come down a little, as pleasant a diner-out as could be met with in London. It followed, therefore, that he had considerable experience of all sorts of people, society and societies alike being open to him, and it may be added that he seemed equally in his place with regard to both.

To commence fairly—that is, to describe his appearance—he had, as I have said, a figure that was tall and slight, somewhat too much so, it must be owned, for grace. His face was even at first sight remarkable for that curious refinement of features and expression that gives a very distinct charm, and preserved still much of the delicate look of boyish days, though the soft fine brown hair had grown thin and grey with years. His eyes were grey, blue, hazel—rather, of all sorts of colours, and soft and penetrating; but his face, now very thin, seemed too narrow, and the same might be said of the high, refined forehead, to which his slight baldness gave more effect in these his later years. On the whole one would have called it the face of a man of dreams rather than action, of an idealist rather than a reformer, if it had not been for one feature that seemed rather to contradict and contrast with the rest. The lower part of his face, though delicate, was firmly set; and the fine lines of his mouth had very thin, tightly-

closing lips, which needed the charm of his smile to dispel an impression of close and almost sarcastic reserve. That look detracted slightly from the gentleness of his face, but it gave strength to it too.

And perhaps to those who knew him it agreed well enough with certain peculiarities of disposition, with which more familiar intimacy made them soon aware. He was a kind friend, and a most sympathetic adviser, ready always both to relieve or to console, a gentle watcher by a sick bed, a patient listener to any tale of suffering or wrong. But this peculiar sympathy of disposition was entirely and only for others, his dearest friends dared ask him no question about himself, and in all times of trouble too great to be ignored, he shrank as far as might be from any companionship, preferring always to be sick or sad alone. It is probable that many of his companions considered this one of his most estimable qualities, the burdens of our neighbours having very scanty charms for us. Nevertheless it rendered all intimacy

beyond a certain point rather difficult to be maintained at all.

Mr. Arlathnot's uncle on his mother's side had been a very eminent Low Church preacher and as he had himself been remarkable, even when a boy, for the intensity of his religious convictions, it followed that her relations entertained great hopes for him. His father, however, was connected, also on the mother's side, with some very exalted families, and his hopes for his boy's welfare had something of a different complexion. It may have, been with a view to ensuring the fulfilment of his own ideas that he insisted that the lad should have a college education, and secured his introduction to the fastest, richest, wildest set of young men of whom the University of Oxford could boast. The poor, quiet youth who had been much praised at school for the excellent moral influence he had helped to introduce, found himself not at all at a premium amongst his new acquaintances; and probably owed to the shy solitude of those college days much of the

enduring and extraordinary reserve that marked his later life. After a time, however, he became, after a sober fashion, a favourite with them all, and made some friendships in particular that lasted on through the after years. In the matter of work his success was more pronounced, he obtained a first-class in classics, and narrowly missed one in mathematics—a triumph and a failure that he felt far more keenly than his father did for him. His father died almost as soon as his college days were over, and he found himself at the age of twenty-two a rich young bachelor with the world before him.

So began Mr. Arlathnot's life, which I need not follow in detail through its later days. Enough has been said to show the double current through which his early years were formed, the pleasant society in London seasons, and country shooting boxes, that was always ready to open its doors to him; and the more grim, less genial, but at the same time more fervent influences that reigned in the dingy town where his uncles

lived. To the young man this life of districts and prayer meetings, of associations, and debating societies, had its fascination too; he joined with eagerness in the work of it, and gained from it many useful lessons to carry back with him to London days. They looked with great suspicion on his London life, these friends and relations in the country; shook their heads over fashionable garden-parties, and whispered together over some rumours of balls. One of them, a very zealous and most upright man, adopted strong ideas on the subject, and undertook to express personally to Mr. Arlathnot (who listened in silence) his opinion of what his future fate might be. Another, a lady, whose family had had "losses," and who therefore, perhaps, was bitter, divorced him for ever from her good opinion because twice in the course of a conversation he had happened to mention the name of a lord. "So unnecessary," she said, apparently not considering that a careful silence has more in it of affectation than unworldliness.

And meanwhile, while such things were being said, other friends had their opinions too. "Arlathnot is a famous fellow to meet at the Club," said one, "and he knows whom to choose for a dinner-party and that sort of thing; but if one goes promiscuous like to his house one finds there such tag and such rag as can't be met with elsewhere in London. I suppose he likes to be the great fellow amongst small people, poor old man." From all which we may easily imagine that the man with the donkey in old times is not the only one who has found it a difficult matter to please the world at large.

Arlathnot, however, concerned himself very little with this, and still less, as the years went on with him. Whatever might be said of him behind his back he had the rare gift of being able to win the immediate goodwill of almost all with whom he spoke, and the ever-widening circle of widely differing friends and acquaintances gave variety and pleasure to his life. Doubtless



that sympathetic faculty of which I have spoken was of great assistance to him. It was commonly reported—though the story may have been more typical than true—that a certain rather distinguished Baronet came in great haste to his house on the morning of the death of a certain beautiful actress desiring not spiritual reproof but human consolation on the occasion. The story is characteristic at least. But—lest any should mistake—it had better perhaps be added that no assumed feeling or deference made the principal attraction of Mr. Arlathnot in the opinion of his friends, an idea of genuine earnestness and sincerity of religion in the man impressed them most; and to many of them the world, and more than the world, would have seemed to ring false if they had not believed that Arlathnot was true.

That is high praise, for the life that has made itself into a standard has done more good than sermons. Nevertheless it must be owned at the same time that in his closer and more domestic relations Mr. Arlathnot's con-

duct scarcely seemed to deserve the encomiums that could be bestowed on his more public life—in those things in which men of many faults so often do well he had not been able to succeed. As a husband and a father he had failed.

Doubtless in both cases the fault was not all his own. He had married, whilst still very young, a lovely girl who had been the belle of the last London season, and a centre of attraction for the fortune hunters. Arlathnot had no reason to desire her wealth, but her face and manner had impressed him, and though he must have known her to be entirely different from himself, he probably imagined that his own personal influence would soon mould her ideas to the form that he desired. The young bride, on her own part, supposed, no doubt, that a very little matrimonial education would cure her partner of his foolish austerity, and render him as complete a man of the world as her heart could wish. They were both wrong, natures are not always changed so easily.

Mr. Arlathnot's married life lasted four years, and it must be owned that the first at least of these was spent in almost continual strife. The lady was imperious, exacting, and extravagant, she required of him a constant round of gaiety, objected to his friends, cared nothing for his opinions, and laughed at his religion. Her husband was patient by nature, but he was young too, and there would occur at intervals between them very painful scenes, generally ended on his part by the outbursts of passionate affection with which his young nature tried still to win her back to him. He got tired of these at last.

During his last three years of wedded days, Mr. Arlathnot changed his course of action, and resigned himself to being a very submissive, and, as his friends freely said, a very hen-pecked man. His manner of living was entirely altered, he gave up none indeed of his old occupations, but yet he was to be seen everywhere at balls, theatres, or assemblies with his wife, and his house, once so quiet, became now full of

guests, and one of the gayest in the town. Nor did even this obedience avail, at first, to shield him; his wife had a sharp and lively tongue, and for a while amused her visitors constantly by turning its edge on him, describing missionary meetings, laughing at preachers, or making allusions to speeches of his own with the most delighted relish. His old friends, who were not so often now to be seen within his doors, often observed him as she spoke, but their scrutiny gained but small results; Arlathnot would listen with unruffled brow, and turn with composure when she had done to greet his guests. Going home, or in confidences at their Clubs, they whispered to each other that it must be that he "gave it her" in private, or else he was but a poor creature after all.

They were entirely wrong. Mr. Arlathnot addressed no private reproaches to his wife, but neither was his conduct governed entirely by such feeble motives as their wit supposed. To her, indeed, it was a source rather of bewilderment, and it is probable that she felt

far less contempt inwardly for him than her words declared. No doubt he thought he was treating her with the most Christian forbearance that could be shown. He paid her bills, retrenching silently in many ways that his charities might not suffer from her extravagance. He allowed her to have the guests and to go to the entertainments that she preferred. Nay, he did still more, for by keeping always with her, he was a constant shield between her unthinking levity and the surmises of the world, which, seeing them always together, could make no stories out of her. For the rest, he contented himself with shutting himself up more and more in a close and still reserve that no shaft of hers could penetrate to wound. During those last years, though he was always by her side, as I have said, he spoke no word to her of his own thoughts or feelings, gave her no opinions, expressed none of her, but with regard to all matters that might reach below the surface of their minds preserved the same cold, unbroken silence

that no offence even of hers could probe. It was all so natural to him that he *could* not probably estimate the effect of such conduct on the hotter and more impulsive disposition of his wife—he knew, indeed, that her manner to him became pained and even timid when she spoke—but it was an astonishment when standing by her bedside in those last, sad hours that came after the fever had begun, he heard her implore him with floods of tears not to treat her child with the unvarying, unceasing cruelty he had bestowed upon herself; and heard her add, with every appearance of fully believing what she said, that his hardness and neglect alone would deprive her of all strength to live.

The doctor and nurse were present, and if it had not been so, by the side of that sick-bed no arguing and no recrimination would have been possible; he soothed her with what gentle words he could, and finding that his presence even was too exciting for her to bear, retired to his own room to think and pray for her. That whole long winter's

afternoon he watched and waited, on his knees for the greater part of the time, trying hard to pray for the young life below. It seemed so easy to do that. But though the thought of its struggle was terrible to him, and though in deed and in truth he longed for her to live, he could not deceive himself into thinking that he was praying also for himself; the wretchedness of those years of married life, never so fully realized as now, pressed hard upon his thoughts, he had no strength to hope for better things, or power to wish that the misery might be all commenced again. That unowned consciousness seemed stronger than the spoken prayer—before the evening was over the young wife was dead.

We shall have very little understood Mr. Arlathnot's character if we cannot enter in some degree into the reaction of silent, terrible remorse that followed for him on the morning after his release had come. Of this he gave no outward sign to others, save that he kept alone for several days, but the change

in his face and manner was visible to all; and as years went on the alteration in him became even more marked, as it showed itself in his conduct to his son. Doubtless the knowledge that comes after a sudden shock (like the rush of light that seems to succeed a blow) had informed him, as by a revelation, how far removed from the love that triumphs his ideal of patient endurance and disdain had been; and doubtless, too, he had determined that in whatever else he failed, he should not have to reproach himself with an affection too soon resigned again. An ill-fated resolve!—and yet, perhaps, though its results produced more pain they left less bitterness behind them.

The story of Mr. Arlathnot's son, already more than indicated, may be very briefly told. The boy grew up into a beautiful lad, like his mother in face, brave, clever, affectionate as it seemed in disposition, and popular with all who knew him. Beneath these finer qualities, however, lay others not so readily perceived—a determined self-



indulgence, and perversity, an extravagance that even during his youth had a tendency towards still darker failings, and a power of concealing all these things that was not in itself the least terrible failing of them all. His father, whose doting love was an object of ridicule to his friends, must have become in time aware of this—even in early days those who observed the almost foolish fondness with which his eyes would rest upon his boy's face, could not help observing their anxiety too. But he seemed to cling to his trust with desperate hope in spite of that—he would believe in his son, in this last legacy the unloved wife had left; it *could* not be but that if he loved on still the time would come when his boy would turn to him, and all would then be well.

The rest, as I have said, can be briefly told. It is a terrible thing to watch a shipwreck, but the slow process of the corruption of years on that which we would give the best part of our life to save, must be still more terrible to see. Those must have been years

of slowly drawn-out torture in Mr. Arlathnot's life. The boy, sent almost as a child to school, was promptly expelled from there, was placed then under a tutor who could not manage him, and sent then to a public school, from which he was expelled again. Still the father clung to his belief. His boy was of a "peculiar disposition;" the masters could not "understand him;" he needed some special training that only the most watchful care and affection could give. Resigning without a murmur all the plans for himself that he had formed, he kept his son now always at home with him, procuring for him the best masters and tutors that he could find, giving up many of his own employments that he might study with him, interesting himself in every little plan for recreation or for work as if these had been for some delight and profit of his own. In vain! The lad wearied of the restraint, however tenderly enforced, disliked the companionship of one to whom he felt himself compelled in some measure to submit, rebelled in secret, and

hid his rebellion by deceitfulness. At school and even in his tutor's house he had always chosen for himself the worst of playmates. The same tendency clung to him in his father's home, and now and again Mr. Arlathnot was compelled to separate him forcibly from the companions he had found. Then came deeper trouble; he was heavily in debt, and no persuasion could draw from him the manner in which these debts had been incurred. He came at last one night to his father's room, and volunteered a full and complete confession, with such expressions of penitence as might give rise to hopes that at length the turning point had come. Mr. Arlathnot, overjoyed as one who sees before him the end of a long night-time, granted all and more than all that he had asked, and taking him in his arms gave him his forgiveness too. The next morning he was informed—by others—that the debt of which his son had told him had been only used as a pretext for obtaining the money he required, and with this knowledge, too, came

information of a long course of evil of which no word of the full confession had deigned to speak. The fear of detection alone had induced his words, but the money, so easily gained, had been gambled away amongst his companions that very night, and had not been able to serve the purpose for which it was required. That morning he had escaped to some friends of his own and had left his home.

Worn out, and yet even now not daring to despair, Mr. Arlathnot spent the morning in writing to his son. He implored him now at last to be candid with him; he promised to free him from all his difficulties, and volunteered again a full forgiveness, adding, however, that without some hope of his penitence and reformation he could not receive him again into his home. Edward Arlathnot, only too glad, as it seemed, to be delivered at last from parental restraint, gave no answer to this appeal at all. Long days passed, his father waiting always, sitting up night after night in the hope that he

might yet return, the painful time scarcely relieved by the visits of his son's creditors in the daytime. Then came news that the boy, for he was scarcely more, had found some acquaintances, young and adventurous like himself, and was going to America to seek employment there. The poor father, in an agony, sent to implore that he would at least see him once before he went. There came no answer, until at last, the day after the ship had sailed, arrived a letter: a few insolent words to express the boy's joy that the tie between them must now at last be broken.

Mr. Arlathnot was receiving a deputation from some charitable society when the letter came—he got up at once and left the room. That was with him a sign of rare emotion; but he was very quiet when he was alone, both whilst he read the letter and after he had destroyed it.

“He will be sorry one day,” he said, whilst slow, smarting tears rose to his eyes, and then he went back to the deputation again. More and more as the days went on

he told himself that his son would be sorry, he had such a quick, affectionate nature in spite of all his faults, he must feel penitent in time.

The next tidings that came were that the ship was lost.

Then at last Mr. Arlathnot gave way. Through all his life, in whatever had happened to him, in his trials as a husband as when he had missed a double first at college, he had always been able to preserve the same steadfast composure, continuing his many duties and employments with the proud calmness which he himself believed, as others for him, that nothing would be able to disturb. He scarcely knew how it was that that was broken now; he felt only that on life itself seemed to be the terrible strain beneath which the very sources of existence begin to bend and fail. Those months in London were like a delirious dream—the dream of nights and days from which we do not hope to wake.

We can go on with our story now.

## CHAPTER V.

INDEED that simple record seems to have little enough to do with the deeper sorrow of which we have just been hearing. But life has subtle and curiously interwoven links which may bring the child's trouble closer to the man's agony than we imagine possible after all.

On the last day in June Mr. Arlathnot left London and went down to his country home. It had been very hot weather, there had been fierce thunderstorms, and from the windows of the train he could see the grey bent heads of the beaten hay that the farmers had not dared yet to cut. The last hard rain that morning had scarcely cooled the air or softened the red, sultry mist over sky and earth, and the thunder muttered in the distance still. He saw these things, but could not make himself understand them, his brain seemed in a curious dead state that no impressions could arouse.

After all there was some comfort in this stupidity, it was better than the fever that had kept him wandering for so many nights through the streets of London, that had forced him to be always walking, even when he shut himself up alone in his room, and told himself that he had come there to rest. The ceaseless roll of the City, so painful to a sick brain, was left behind him, and the dome of St. Paul's, which had begun to haunt his thoughts like a malady, being in his eyelids whenever he closed them, was also fainter now. He was only stupid, as if he had taken an opiate, and that was a pleasant feeling that he could not fight with. And yet he thought he ought to do so—only he was too tired for it.

He had made up his mind that this day of his return from London should be that of the end of his malady as well; he would leave that and the City behind together. A foolish resolve, for we cannot rid ourselves so easily of any mental ailment, and yet it had been such an effort to him to tear



himself away from the place where first the news had come, that he could bring himself to believe that something at least of the rest must be torn away as well. A strange, dim hope, far more terrible than despair, had seemed to haunt the houses and the roofs, and the great dome rising grey above them all; now that these were gone he could tell himself that which he had always known from the first—that his son was dead. Dead—lost—drowned far away from home; he would know no more than that.

Sometimes he felt a sort of anger against himself, he took it all so quietly now. He had never been able to shed tears, not even when the news had first come, but at least he had been miserable then. Now he felt quiet, unable to think or grieve, almost in a pleasant state, carrying with him always the luxury of a stunned brain that cannot wake itself to trouble. Dim ideas were in his mind of tales he had heard of men in trances who see, and hear, and feel all that

goes on around them and yet cannot rouse themselves to speak ; a fear was on him too, he felt unable to guide himself, and knew not in what manner the waking would come. And still the train went on and drew nearer to his home at last.

It was a lovely summer's evening, the thunder clouds had rolled away in the distance, and the golden evening light was on cornfields and meadows, on the long fields of grey, bending hay that raised itself a little now that the storms were gone. Mr. Arlathnot had kept close to the window of the carriage through all his long journey, but he had retained only a confused notion of trees, and towns, and rivers, and at last he must have sunk into a long unconsciousness, for it came upon him suddenly that he was in the midst of familiar scenes again.

The train was sweeping round a sharp curve ; beyond that, he knew, his own fields lay. All at once a trembling began to possess him, his heart fluttered, and his hands

shook, but the meaning of this emotion he could not understand at all.

In another instant it was before him, the scene he had expected—the great cornfield, flooded with evening light, stretched out into the distance, and in the midst of the green, straight, moving heads, with the light upon them, the three old elms, dark and clustered together, cast the cool shadows of their branches. He had known the field all his life. Without looking again he covered his face with his hands and cried like a child.

He was quite quiet when the little station was reached, and he knew also that the worst was over now. No one observed him as he got, tired and trembling, out of the carriage; he found his way almost blindly to the little waiting-room, where repairs were being done, lay down on a bench there, and went to sleep. . . .

The striking of the clock roused him when nearly an hour had passed. He sat up confused, moving the numbed arm on which his

head had lain. The evening was very still, and through the open door he could see the light of the sunset on the clouds. A red rose had been dropped on the seat on which he sat; he took it and fingered it absently, his lips working as he thought. Slowly it all came back to him. He could think quietly; doubtless, in one sense, the worst was over now. But only in one. It still lay before him—the lonely home.

Well, there was no good in shrinking from it. He got up, pressing the cool rose for an instant against his hot lips before he laid it down, and went out at the door, too tired still for connected thought or prayer. He had been observed; the stationmaster met him as he came out on the platform, a big, grey-haired fellow, with his coat off and a large spade in his hand, for he amused himself with gardening in intervals of trains, and his peas were much on his mind just then.

“I see you awhile go, Mr. Arl’thnot,” he said, touching his grey hair with his hand

by way of salutation, "but I told 'em not to disturb you, I did now."

Mr. Arlathnot stood still. He was accustomed to talk to the man, but he found that any sort of greeting was impossible now.

"Oh, sir, is it true—now is it?"

"Yes—I don't know—yes," scarcely knowing what he said.

"Oh, sir, we can't scarce believe it, any on us. And how long might you 'a known it now?"

Arlathnot looked at him with blank eyes, as if he had not heard or understood, and then, without a word, turned slowly away.

The man stood looking after him as he went out by the little gate and slowly up the hill on which the evening light was shining.

"Poor gentleman," he said, shaking his head, "he takes it sad to heart," and then he went back to look at his peas again.

And Arlathnot went on his way up the hill, whilst flecks of golden light shone on the masses of dark clouds above his head.

He felt tired and sore-hearted; with greater composure had come the slow bitterness that had scarcely been felt before. The lonely home—the home that would always be lonely now—there was no good thinking of that.

He passed the dark plantations, and, reaching the top of the hill, crossed the road and took the path across the fields—a little path scarcely to be seen for the waving corn and bending hay through which it led. This little footpath, too, he had known through all his life. How often he had walked over it towards his home in old times, a young man full of hopes for the life that lay before him then. And now in all the world there seemed no more earthly hopes for him.

He passed the corn, and the hay, and reached the meadow of shorter grass on which, too, fell the evening light. And now close before him was the orchard with its ancient trees, and beyond that again—lifting his eyes with an effort—he saw his home. Red, grey, quaint, not too large for beauty, raising its red twisted chimneys against the

trees behind, there was no alteration here. Only even from this distance he could see that blinds were down and shutters drawn; for the first time there was no welcome here for him. He set his teeth, breathed one short prayer for strength and patience, and went bravely on towards it at once.

It was all so still that, standing by the door, he almost feared to disturb the silence. He did ring, however, once, twice, but no answer came. There was a sound of a window opening above; he moved a step from under the grey stone porch to look, and then saw that the old woman who kept his house was peering down from above, too cautious to open the door till she had seen who the intruder was. Her old head was stuck out all round with curl-papers, a familiar sight, for it was a Saturday evening, and she always liked to appear in curls on Sunday.

“Here! Molly, don’t you know me,” called Mr. Arlathnot.

“SIR-’E!”

The extreme force with which the syllable was breathed could be heard even from below; the next instant the window was hastily shut, and distinct sounds intimated that Molly was rushing down the stairs.

“ Oh, Mr. Philip.”

That was all she said as she threw open the door and they stood for one instant in the porch. She was not in such tidy trimness as was usual with her when her master was at home, for she had not stayed, as usual, to arrange her apron or to smooth her hair. But these things spoke more of anxiety than of neglect, and she looked at him with excited, anxious eyes. Arlathnot nodded to her without speaking, and went into the house.

“ Where is John ? ” he asked, stopping and turning round to her as she followed him through the hall. For that first instant he could not have spoken a word.

“ He be in the harness-house. He have the rheumatics bad.”

“ That’s a bad job. I did not know of



that. Well, you can soon get things ready for me, can't you?"

"You didn't let us know as you was comin', sir," she said, with some reproach in her tone.

"I know; I was not sure that I should be able," he answered wearily. "Let me sit down somewhere. I am tired out for once."

"Wait a minute then, sir," she said, and went on, whilst he followed her slowly. She led the way to a small room he used as a study, and throwing open the shutters let in the evening light.

There was a small horsehair sofa in one corner. Arlathnot sat down on that, leaning his elbow on the arm, and his head on his hand. The familiar comfort of being amongst his own possessions was beginning to prevail over him, but the dreary bitterness mingled with that as well. His books and account books were round him, but for whose sake should he store up wealth or learning now?

Lost—gone—drowned in the night-time. There was no getting away from that.

Raising his eyes slowly at last he saw that his old housekeeper was standing by his side, looking anxiously at him. For one instant their eyes met. Doubtless the desire to comfort that becomes overpowering in its desire for utterance was in her mind, but she was wiser than the station-master had been.

“Oh, Mr. Philip,” she said again, no more than that.

Arlathnot put down his arm and drew himself up a little, though he looked down upon the ground. He felt for the first time, for he had seen in her eyes since she had seen him, how altered his face had now become—wan, pinched, haggard, a very spectre of himself. And for the first time also it seemed as if he felt all at once how terrible the strain of the last few weeks had been; he must struggle for life itself against that before his strength should fail, only—

Only for a while, at least, he must break down; he found he could not escape from that now that he had entered his home

again. Well, at any rate, he would be brave, and face the worst at once.

"I told Evans to send word to you," he said, still looking hard at the pattern on the carpet as he spoke.

"Yes, sir."

"Have you altered it—his room?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"I will go there then."

It did not seem strange to him that she should follow him up the stairs, and to the end of the long passage, but at the door he paused.

"I shall be coming down soon," he said in a curious, slow voice as he turned to her. "Go away now, please, and go downstairs. I shall not be long."

"Yes, sir. At what time?" she asked, thinking about his supper as she spoke.

He waited, considering. The clock struck below.

"In an hour," he said.

Strange in what minutest trifles a character will show itself, even in such moments

as these! Mr. Arlathnot was a methodical man, after his fashion; he entirely meant what he said when he set a time to his agony in this manner.

Yet, when he had opened the door, he waited for a full minute, not daring to go in. For that minute, too, she saw the room, the sunset in full glory beyond the small window, the white narrow bed, the boy's shoes lying carelessly in the middle of the room, and an unstrung bow leaning against a chair. For one minute—he went in and shut the door, and she went downstairs.

Half-an-hour passed.

Molly had gathered some ripe strawberries, had sent a boy out into the village to ask after butter and cream, had changed her apron, and arranged her dress. All this had taken some while; the time seemed to her greater than it was, and her woman's curiosity, a little set on one side by other feelings, began to get the upper hand of her again. What was her master doing all by himself up there? Who could tell that he

would not take some harm? Someone really ought to see.

It is wonderful how a lonely house can increase anxiety—the very stillness of the tables and chairs seemed to breathe of harm. Molly got frightened, “in a fluster like,” she said afterwards to a friend, and felt some action to be necessary. Mindful, however, still of Mr. Philip’s wishes, she only went first into an empty apartment beneath the room in which she had left him, and listened there. Yes, those were his footsteps, pacing up and down with a regular and even sound, there seemed no harm in them. All at once they stopped. She waited an instant. There was still silence. Her mind “misgav” her, and she hastened upstairs at once.

She had nearly got to the end of the long passage when another sort of fright overcame her, and she went round by a different way. For, during that one minute’s observation, she had seen that the door of the little dressing-room, opening into the bedroom, had been left partly open, and stand-

ing there she could see without being seen. The plan succeeded as she had hoped. Her heart beat fast, but she need not have been afraid, if any storm had been there it was over then. Everything was quiet. I will give her own words as she spoke them to her friend : Molly loved her master, but the uncultured have few thoughts of reticence.

“He stood there in the room, quite quiet like,” she said, “a foot distant from the bed, or it might be more. He never move nor stir, but stood wi’ his head sunk, lookin’ down’ards as if a coffin was afore him. And then he just shook of his hands a little like, and then he kneel down and spoke” —

But what he said, Molly, with more consideration, declined to tell.

“Mr. Philip always speak so beautiful,” she said, and that was all.

Indeed, she had heard but brokenly, though she had seen the clasping trembling hands that gave their own force to the broken words—“If I have forgotten Thee in my trouble . . . if I have been

wrong . . . I could not help it just at first . . . Thou hast created, and in Thy hands I leave this life that was so very dear to me . . . Forgive him and me . . . Help me not to break my heart . . . If there is any work . . . I would not die just yet. If I have forgotten the better love . . . It is so dark now" —

And then came violent weeping, and Molly thought it prudent to retire with her apron to her eyes. She had seen the last of the storm, though that she did not know just then.

Punctually as the hour struck Mr. Arlathnot came downstairs, and she saw the change in his appearance at once. He had been to his own room and bathed his face and removed the journey's dust; he walked upright now, and seemed cheerful, though there were shadows under his eyes as if he had barely recovered from prostrating illness. Directly she saw him she knew he intended to be brave, and his first words made that intention clear.

"Well, Molly," he said, "what have you got for me?"

"There's cold meat and eggs, sir," said Molly, curtsying, "and bacon, and a nice fowl."

"Ah, well, get me some bread and milk. But you must make it well," he said smiling, for he saw she was disappointed; "or, stop, perhaps the fowl will be better after all."

There was real self-denial in this, for he had a sick distaste to even the sight of solid food, but it was in his nature always to do such small acts as these.

Need I say how carefully Molly served up that fowl, when, after an interval of time it was cooked at last; with what skill the bread-sauce was prepared, with what anxious hands she picked out the very largest strawberries that they might serve as a dessert when the meal was done? Nor was all this only another instance of a woman's pity; at all times and under all circumstances Molly's one delight and pride



was in her master. I would be almost ashamed to give instances of the admiration she had for him; let it suffice, for example, that though she was no lover of "meetin's" she would walk any amount of miles to one if he was only to be present there. Her husband did not share these feelings to their full extent, it was the opinion of John that Mr. Philip was "a kind gentleman in all his ways, but daft." But this is a digression.

Supper ended—by means of several convulsive efforts which, after all, did not accomplish much—Mr. Arlathnot dismissed Molly, and went to his own room. He carried the lamp there, for he had no thought of sleeping yet.

It was a stormy night, a hot wind shook blind and curtains; through the open window without the moon struggled amongst tumbled clouds, bright or dark as her light could gleam or not. That restlessness without was pleasant, a quieter night would have suited his feelings less.

For about an hour he paced slowly up and down with his arms twisted tightly behind his back; then sat down, with his brow still knit and his eyes thoughtful, as if some problem were before him. And it was so indeed—the problem of his life—a matter that is not so easy to decide when once our young years have gone.

No—for his young years, in all their many thoughts and plans, had always linked those hopes of fame with hopes of affection too: no vision of his future had ever risen before him that had not as its background the voices of his home. All over now; wife and child were lost, worse than lost; it would have been better for him to have had no wife or child at all. And then suddenly, as in remorse, his heart cried out to him that he had loved his son.

He got up and walked up and down for a while, and looked out at drifting moon and clouds, then sat down again.

No, it was not easy to decide; he could not change his life as a younger man might

do—could not give up the employment he had chosen, or desert the friends who believed in him. And yet the ceaseless round of work in London—its fever-stricken alleys, its prayer meetings and speech-makings, still less its dinner-parties and its concerts—was not a thing to be returned to yet; he must wait and rest till more strength for these should come. Yet, to wait here—here in his home, eating out his heart in this solitude where wife and son had been. He got up and walked up and down once more; but only for a while, and he sat down again with renewed resolution in his face. No; he would be brave; he had faced the worst already, and would not break down again. He had seen his son's room; it was before him now, with the glorious sunset shining in on it, and the unstrung bow leaning against a chair by the white, narrow bed. That was to him a farewell, like that which men give to some dead, dear face, and so completely did it seem so to him, that already the thought of that farewell that could never be given was growing vague

and confused ; he *had* in truth given his last look, and was at rest. So—his mind was clear now for thought and prayer ; he need be afraid for himself no longer.

Again for about an hour he paced slowly up and down, his arms less tightly twisted now, his face less sad than thoughtful as he walked. This was not the mood, nor was he the man for any fancy of long indulgence in what is called the luxury of grief : beneath his quietness lay always the nervous activity that would have made such idleness impossible to him. Slowly, as he walked up and down with intent face, there rose in his mind thoughts of little improvements long wanted for this estate at home ; he would have leisure to attend to farm buildings and neglected gardens now. And so, gradually, as his slow thoughts formed themselves one after another in his mind, he saw himself living on quietly, resuming correspondence with his friends, taking up one by one the threads of his old life again.

He thought himself almost contented when

he sat down once more. It was only then that a sudden question rising, not slowly, as the thoughts had done, but suddenly, like some phantom springing out of them all, came before his mind.

What was he to do with his son's room ?

A small question, born no doubt of diseased nerves and illness rather than of thought, but at that moment it seemed more than he had strength to bear. He tried to press it down and keep it out of his mind, but it had too much power for that, and as he walked up and down it paced the room with him.

Yes, doubtless he might go on living quietly at home. His son's room would be there always with him too. He had said farewell to it once when the sunset shone, but he could not so put it out of his mind and life ; it would be there always with him.

No, he would not see it again ; he would lock it up, lose the key ; there could be nothing easier than that. And then he felt that the temptation of that locked door would be always too much for him ; he would break

it, force it open, get through it some way, and on to the agony beyond. A haunting, frenzied feeling, a longing to pull down the house, to hurt himself, to do something desperate, began to seize upon his mind. He threw himself into a chair, and covered his face with his hands.

“Oh, God help me! Must I suffer like this all my life?” he cried.

No; he had not striven and prayed through all his past years in vain. Something of the calmer, better feeling so lately gained came back to him once more.

“I told myself, when I stood by his bedside, which was like his grave to me,” he said, “I told myself I would try not to be a worse man because of my love for him—that if I had done wrong—by him”—even in thought the words came brokenly now—“some love for God or man for his sake should try to make amends for that. I will do that—with his room too if I can. There shall be no open graves in my house to break my heart for me. If he knows—he will

know too that it is — because — I loved him ” —

He broke off here, trembling lest tears should come, and buried his face in his hands again. And as he did so, suddenly, as such thoughts will come when we are ill, there rose before him a childish face, sad, wistful, with quivering lips, and blue sorrowful eyes that turned their reproachful glance on him. For one instant he could scarcely remember what it meant.

“Poor child,” he said then, with a slight, thoughtful smile, “she did look so hard at me. And, from what Harman said, I should fancy she must be miserable with him.”

A formless idea ; he made no further attempt to give it life, but went to the window and stood looking out on drifting moon and clouds, and dim branches moving in the darkness, as the wind rushed amongst them in the wild confusion of the night. Thoughts wild and tumultuous as the tempest without surged vaguely in his mind—his dead son, his own future, those last

words of his dying wife that seemed always to haunt his life, and with and beyond these, too, thoughts of that one Sorrow to which all sorrow turns.

“And I thought myself alone,” he said.

Leaving the window, too tired at last to think, he began to prepare himself for rest. Tears came plentifully with his prayers, streaming fast between his fingers, but these came to him as a relief; they helped the exhausted feeling with which at last he laid down his head in the darkness, as a tired child, worn out by some fit of passion, might sink to sleep with its head against its father's breast—for, thank God, we never get too old for that. So at last he slept.

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“Molly,” said Mr. Arlathnot, after breakfast next morning.

“Sir,” said Molly, pausing with the tray all full of things within her hands.

“I think a young lady may be coming here to stay.”



Molly stood and stared.

"It is the daughter of a dear friend of mine," he said, with a faint colour rising in his face. "She has no home—or at least no comfortable home—and I think she may come to live with me; perhaps Miss Clinton may come also if she does."

He said these last words with an effort, for his half-sister was a lady with rigid notions, who kept his candle-ends with strict discipline, and made gruel with an onion in it with her own hands for him when he was ill. Perhaps he would not have had the courage for them if the sun had not shone so brightly on the breakfast table as he spoke. But Molly's face was clouded.

"We must get things square for her—the young lady I mean," went on Mr. Arlathnot, with all the cheerfulness he could. "She is almost a child; I shall be glad not to be quite alone." He waited here for a minute in silence. "I should like her to have—Mr. Edward's room."

And he got up and walked away.

A wise provision or a self-inflicted and therefore needless torture? He scarcely knew. At any rate he had spoken.

The young lady was very much on his mind during the remainder of those summer days—he spoke little, but what he did say had chiefly reference to her. Indeed he had been corresponding with Mr. Harman, and the matter might almost be said to be no longer doubtful now. A pretty little unused room was to be made into a sitting-room for her. The flower gardens were to be much improved. And the strawberries, of which there were great quantities that year, were to be made into jam. Mr. Arlathnot gave no directions for some while after that last, being much elated. For the male mind thinks itself entirely master of all details when it has remembered the jam.

So the summer passed, and the green corn began to take a different colour, as if some more light were on it. Friends and neighbours kept in kindness away from a house that had once been hospitable, and left its

owner to himself. In the evenings when a golden slanting light was on the dark garden paths, he used to walk up and down with folded arms and bent head, a tall, stooping, solitary figure. And so walking he thought of Meg. Through all his sickness, for he was very ill that summer, the idea of the young life that he could help was always present to his mind—he saw it growing up by him, ripening into sweet and steadfast womanhood, and calling his house its home until the time came for him to give it up to another home still dearer and happier than the last. He had outlived the earthly hopes that he had valued, but now they were gone there could be some faint pleasure in this, like a vague echo of departed times.

So the evening light fell on the garden paths, and as Meg had once dreamt, and lost her dream, so Mr. Arlathnot in his turn made his hope of Meg. Was this then also to be vain?

Mr. Harman, away in London, had his own private gratification too. For he too had

been ill, and in moments of irritation the burden of his niece's education seemed almost more than he could endure. There had been many domestic squalls that year. Now, however, the matter would be all happily settled at last. His daughters, though only partially admitted to his confidence, shared his hopes with him. There was certainly no need for any waste of tenderness now.

And it never occurred to them, as it never occurred to him to think that such lack of tenderness, might end possibly by producing a different result from that to which their wishes led, and that young ignorance, reduced to despair, chooses its rescue for itself.

## CHAPTER VI.

MR. HARMAN sat writing in his room on the evening of the eighteenth of July.

Hot and dusty was the evening falling over London at the close of the summer day, hot even as the glare of the noon had been, a livid stifling twilight that seemed breathless for a storm. Far away in the country heavy, cold dews fell over grass and flowers, bathing the earth with freshness, and cool country air lingered and rustled amongst the leaves of the great lime trees round his home. He scarcely thought of them—the air stifled between walls and houses and with the breathing of many men had more life in it to him; he liked to hear round him the tread of feet and the roll of carriages, to feel himself one of a multitude still, and so in these older and idler years to recall the hard-worked energy of old City days once more.

It was perhaps for these reasons, still more than for certain defects of manner, that he

had never been able to make of himself as complete a country gentleman as his ambition had desired. Nothing short of that lost home of his fathers could endear country solitude to him. And that which is not dear is not natural to us.

Now he sat and wrote in his own room, and as the evening darkened laid down his busy pen—for these idler years had their own business too—and began to think, leaning his elbow on the table and his head upon his hand. A hard, thoughtful face it was on which gathered now the twilight gloom, with as little sentiment in the look of it as in any piece of furniture of which his room could boast. Yet his thoughts were taking no uncongenial road, he was thinking that he had been a successful man—upon the whole.

There was a little tap at the door, soft and shy, as if touched by timid fingers. Mr. Harman frowned, he knew very well what this meant, for he had been thinking of his niece at the moment when it came.

“Come in.”



Another instant—and Meg entered, carrying a little lamp, and with the newspaper in her hand. This was her nightly duty, but there had been a domestic storm, and he had scarcely expected her to come. A slight childish figure she looked as she came into the room, her eyelids cast down, and heavy from the morning's tears, her hair soft and fair as a baby's above the black light summer dress she wore. Mr. Harman raised his eyes as she came in, and then looked down, determined not to take any notice of her at all.

She put down the lamp, she unfolded the newspaper with timid care, she fastened the shutters softly—and then, these duties done, she stood silently by his chair, as if waiting for further orders still. Mr. Harman bent his eyes resolutely on his letter, but the silent presence became inconvenient at last.

“What are you staying here for?” he asked.

“Uncle” —

He raised his eyes and saw her troubled face. That surprised him, for her penitence

did not come quickly after her fits of passion now—this was an unusual mood for her.

“Uncle—I wanted to say—I am sorry.”

No answer. Mr. Harman bit his lips and looked down on his letter again.

“I know—I have been always bad,”—he could know without looking how much her lips were trembling. “I have been a great trouble to you—and expense—I wanted you to know—I did think of that”—and here she stopped. Again after a while, “I don’t want you to think very badly of me,” said Meg, and he knew that tears would soon be coming.

“I don’t care for words,” said Mr. Harman, looking up hastily. “I wonder you are not ashamed to come into my room after the manner in which you spoke to me this morning. I should be very much obliged if you would leave it.”

Meg moved to a little distance, and then stood still. Her voice came very softly and timidly, almost in a whisper now.

“Uncle—I wish you would kiss me—just



to-night—as if I were your child, you know.”

There was no answer.

“I should like it,” in still more trembling tones.

There was silence still.

“Please.”

Mr. Harman, undisturbed, kept his eyes upon his letter still. He heard the rustle of her dress behind his chair—in another instant he felt the timid touch of soft, childish lips upon his forehead—and then at once, and hastily, she was gone. He put down the pen he had held all this while, though he had not been writing, and began to walk up and down the room. Some minutes passed before he could compose himself to his work again.

What were his feelings? Irritation principally at the foolish scene, then a curious, vague compunction that had never visited his heart before, then a more defined sense of a vexation of which he had before been conscious. His niece was his brother's daughter, and his brother had lost the family estate,

she had been dependent entirely upon his charity, and now under Mr. Arlathnot's care both wealth and comfort would be hers. It seemed like a sort of injustice to his own girls that this penniless stranger should have so much, and yet if he had been asked, he would have answered truly, that he did not desire his friend's wealth for his daughters or for himself. At any rate, Meg should not depart in triumph, or like an injured being; for the last few days he had done his best to show her what a trouble she had been. Well, it was a good thing, at least, that she seemed repentant—and it would be a still better thing when she had gone. And, having said these words to his compunction, he betook himself to his writing again.

Alas! long years afterwards, sitting alone writing in the evening in that same London room, it was to seem often to him as if he heard that soft knock at the door once more, and Meg entered gently and timidly with the lamp-light on her hair, and placed the newspaper by his side. Past—long past—the

childish lips, so afraid once of a repulse, could not touch his forehead then. He had no thought of such lonely, haunting fancy as he bent over his business letter again.

And Meg was going upstairs to hide herself in her room once more, wild with pleasure, her cheeks flushed, her heart beating as if it would suffocate her with her exultation and her dread. She had said the farewell that she had feared, her cousins were all away, it was very near the end now.

She had no thought that she was returning benefits with evil, and yet she could not have gone without telling her uncle that she was sorry, she had no links of affection to bind her to those she left, and yet the greatest part of her exultation rested in the fact that she had dared to kiss her uncle before she went. To that extent, then, she had a conscience.

And now she sat upon her little bed in the gathering darkness, flushed, excited, perilously lovely, her cheeks burning, her blue eyes shining, her little foot beating the floor

as she sat. She had ten pounds now, including her unexpected share in the bank-notes that an old relative had sent. She was not yet seventeen years old, she was going out into the world to find a home and a living for herself. Her old nurse, not seen or heard of for ten years or more, would give her a shelter for a while, then she would get needlework to do, she would work or teach, and her cousins, who had called her often a charity girl, should not see or hear of her again.

Ah, poor Meg ! sitting alone in the darkening twilight, in what still more doubtful gloom must your visions appear to us ! Children's fancies, fairy tales, pretty thoughts that suit well with cowslip balls and dainty dimpled wrists, we might call such plans as these. Only when children begin to try to realise their visions, *then* these also can be terrible.

What in sober seriousness, indeed, we may ask in that indignation against folly that belongs to maturer years, can induce a girl

under such or like circumstances to leave her home? The world outside, to our more experienced eyes, does not seem so soft a resting place; the toil that wins the daily bread, *if it does win it*, so easy a thing to endure; the struggle against the multitudes so light a conflict to be dared. Then to speak no word of "nameless evil," it is yet no small thing to leave behind the safe shelter of a protected womanhood, and to gain instead the more familiar words and glances, to say no more, that wait outside the barriers of a home. Putting all together—the hard work, the weariness that comes from the constant toil of years, the loneliness in which lurks too so many dangers, it does indeed seem madness only that can take these things as choice and cast all else away.

And yet, these arguments are a little too obvious; there must be something to be said for the other side as well, for the boys and (less often) for the girls who in defiance of danger choose such manner of existence for themselves. If our lives are to a certain

extent in our hands, to that extent we have the power and the right also to direct them. If to escape from a daily pain be excusable, it must also sometimes be allowable to free ourselves from a daily companionship. The argument of submission, so often urged, has more limits than can be readily perceived by those who call all obedience to man obedience to God as well. Yet whether, even allowing all this, it is well to rush suddenly upon so complete a change; whether that change ought not at least to be effected, after long preparation, thought and prayer, with the tenderest consideration also for those with whom we have shared our lives; whether those who neglect all these things have a right to expect success or the power to earn a blessing—is a question their own experience can perhaps most certainly decide.

Enough. Meg felt very naughty that night, thrilled through and through with wicked delightful pleasure, tingling with the excitement of a mischief she had scarcely

dared even to contemplate before. She sat upon her bed whilst the twilight darkened, listening to the roll of the carriages in the streets below, that ceaseless sound of the whirl of London that to certain moods has so strange a sympathy. The night grew darker, there were stars in the sky above, light shone out in the houses below. Still she sat on her bed, for she intended, for the first time in her life, to keep awake through all the night.

Now there were sounds below, footsteps, voices; her cousins had returned and were going to their rooms. They knew nothing yet. Meg laughed softly, with her little hand pressed over her mouth lest her laughter should be heard.

Now it had grown dark, very dark and cold, though still there were lights in the distant streets from which came the noise of footsteps and of carriages. And Meg's eyes burnt so much. Surely there could be no danger in just lying down on her bed, and shutting her eyes for one minute, for

only one. The pillow was so soft and cool to her burning face, the distant sounds came with such a restfulness now her eyes were closed, as if growing more distant still.

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With a sudden movement she started up. The clock below was striking, the grey light of the morning was in the room; and she was lying dressed upon her bed. All at once she remembered. Trembling with fright and shame, she got off her bed and went to the little dressing-table on which her watch was lying. Four o'clock—it was not still too late. The glass showed the drooping lids of her eyes, and the wavy tumbled hair that was falling on her shoulders. Without, great London, scarcely visible now, lay in the grey mists and smoke of early morning. Meg was too excited to be still; she walked up and down the room that the soft, childish footsteps were soon to tread no longer.

No; she must be quick, she dared delay no longer now. She knelt down to say her



prayers, her heart beating so fast that she had scarcely breath enough left with which to think. The sense of wickedness grew fast upon her with this familiar action—unmeaning formula though it had always seemed to her—but with that, too, came with only greater force the hard resolve that can be as powerful in youth as if it had experience to strengthen it. Some softer feeling mingled too—her old nurse would be kind to her—and surely God could not be angry with her for trying to find a home.

She rose from her knees, and dressed herself with care, fastening up her hair in soft fair coils round her head. She had chosen an old black batiste, as the very oldest of all her dresses, for it was her wish to take as little away as possible of all that her uncle had given; for which reason too she had selected an old broad-brimmed, high-crowned, and rather battered black hat, with one narrow strip of velvet round it for its only ornament. Dressed thus in shabby black from head to foot her childish fairness looked

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more lovely than ever, but that was through no design of hers. Once more she paused, when she was dressed, to wind up with care the little watch her uncle had given, and to lay it on the dressing-table after she had wiped away one hot tear that fell on the little gold case she would not use again.

Softly she stole downstairs in the morning darkness, treading on tiptoe, holding her breath lest any in those silent rooms might hear. But no sound of hers disturbed the sleepers. Safely she reached at last the little narrow hall, and opening the door cautiously, let in the morning air, and the sight of the morning greyness in the street without. Then, as if frightened now at the last moment, she stood still on the threshold, holding the door in her hand.

Ah, poor Meg! standing now upon the very verge and threshold of your fate, did no thought arise within you of another distant home that for many weeks now had been prepared for you—of a little room with white curtains and a new pretty carpet on the floor

—small tokens of the loving care that was fashioning your new home for you? One day longer and you might have known—ah, so foolish, so unwilling to wait even one day for the help of God. The door closed upon her, and the world without received her.

## CHAPTER VII.

ON that same day in August Mr. Arlathnot returned to London.

He had heard from his friend that his illness was now almost over, and that he was intending to start immediately for his home in the country, and he had therefore himself come up to town with the object of completing personally the arrangement already begun. Indeed most arrangements were completed now. The little room, once the scene of such painful memories, was bright and gay, new furnished, hung with pictures, and with new bright books in the old carved bookcase, where once the schoolboy's library had been. Also the garden was improved, and even the dining-room and drawing-room had something of a brighter aspect now. How much pain had gone to the making of these alterations Mr. Arlathnot alone could tell, but completed they were, and though he

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shrank inwardly from the thought of the last few weeks he did not repent his work.

And doubtless it was a comfort to him to have something of the future to occupy his mind on this his first return to London. As it was he had chosen to travel by another route, not daring yet to pass the field in which the elm trees were.

No matter! he kept his mind steadily fixed on the thing he was going to do, which must be decided and finally completed now. He had made up his mind after much inward reflection that there would be no need to subject himself or the new inmate to the terrors of Miss Clinton, and was already in correspondence with a lady housekeeper, a distant cousin, who seemed promising. "At any rate," he said to himself, "the world can hardly say I am going to marry them both, so the worst difficulty will be divided for me." It had been a real difficulty to him, for he knew enough of the power of the world's judgment to have no light contempt for it.

Perhaps it was curious that the thought

had never entered his mind that some greater difficulty might still arise, but Mr. Harman's letters had suggested none. It was not indeed like his general conduct to carry out hastily a suddenly thought of scheme, but then since his son's death so many things had changed. This one small hope was left, and he held fast by it, without considering more.

So towns and country with the summer sunlight on them were passed, and the great city closed him in again. He did not go to his own house, but to some lodgings of which he knew, and there waited nearly an hour to rest. Perhaps it was natural that when he set out at last he should be thinking more of his own last interview with Mr. Harman than of Meg.

Mr. Harman's house was in Bayswater: he was in treaty for one in more fashionable quarters, but had not yet accomplished the move. Arlathnot walked across the Gardens to it, over the short, much-trodden grass, and under the shade of London trees, dark

with their summer foliage now. Sunlight was everywhere, shining on the grass, glittering in the water; it was a great relief to him not to be in his own house, and he could not but feel something like reviving hope as he went. So he stood before his friend's door at last.

The footman looked serious when he opened it, but then so many things may make a footman look serious. He did not think much of that. A housemaid who crossed the hall was crying; he observed that too as he went, but he did not think much of that. The house looked the same as usual, and one of the girls was practising on the piano in the drawing-room above. His breath came a little quicker, with something like a sense of a hope soon to be completed as he entered his friend's room.

Mr. Harman was sitting at his writing as usual. His face looked rather yellow and haggard, but perhaps his recent illness was to blame for that, for the sort of start too he gave as Arlathnot came in. He rose, looked

hard at his friend, and pointed to a chair without a word.

"You—you did not expect me?" said Arlathnot rather surprised, as he sat down.

"No."

"I am disturbing you, I am afraid; I am very sorry. Go on and finish your writing."

Mr. Harman, without obeying, sat down and twisted his pen between his fingers, leaning over the back of his chair as he did so that he might still look towards his friend. Arlathnot, whose mind was occupied with their last interview, thought with a sudden sharp shame that he was surprised to see how quick his own recovery had been. But his companion's first words had no reference to that.

"Where do you come from?" he asked.

"From Blakeney this morning."

"Then you have not had the letter I wrote to you to-day?"

"No; how could I possibly?"

Again silence.

"Do tell me if I am bothering you," said



Arlathnot, with his charming laugh. "I know it is a shame to disturb such a creature for business as you are in the morning."

"It is not that," said Mr. Harman, and became silent again, twisting his pen between his fingers still.

"Is anything wrong?" asked Arlathnot at last, more seriously, for this continued uneasiness began to alarm him.

"Well—yes."

Arlathnot was silent for some instants, unwilling to question further. But as the expected words did not come he spoke at last.

"May I ask what it is?" he said.

"Oh, nothing of consequence—Arlathnot, have you your head still set upon this scheme of yours?"

"Certainly. I came up to speak to you about it to-day."

"Then you may put it out of your head again, that's all; Meg's gone."

The other stared at him in blank amazement.

"Gone?"

"There is not much good in repeating words, is there? I tell you she left my house this morning."

"But—but—you know where she went. to; you were prepared for this?"

"I tell you all I know. Kittie heard the hall door shut this morning between four and five. She has taken nothing with her except her pocket-money; she went out into the street, and has gone."

Arlathnot made no answer beyond a quick catching of his breath. He let his head sink upon his hands, and was silent.

"This is a great trouble to you," he said at last in a low voice, and without looking up.

Mr. Harman shrugged his shoulders.

"An annoyance at least," he replied.

"She is not worth the troubling for."

"Were you in any way prepared for this?"

"She has said times and again when her temper fits were on that she would do some

such thing as this. I made the same answer every time. My door was open to her; if she preferred the streets to my house she was welcome to her choice."

"Of course," said his companion quickly, "you said that to frighten her?"

"I said it because it was true, that's all."

"But you have been making inquiries after her?"

"No, I have not."

"But—you intend to?"

"Certainly not."

"Merciful Heaven!" cried Arlathnot, starting to his feet, "you do not mean to tell me you are going to leave that poor, pretty child, perhaps to be lost, and make no efforts to save her?"

Mr. Harman, rising too, looked still with the same steady, hard glance towards his friend. His voice came low, but without faltering as he spoke.

"She has chosen her own path. I will leave her to her choice."

"God forgive you then—though, for my

own part, I cannot see how a man who can do such a thing can even hope to be forgiven."

Mr. Harman's face turned more yellow and contracted, his eyes more hard and fixed, but there was no trembling of anger in his voice ; the slow words themselves, that seemed to drop one by one as he spoke them, gave the only evidence of passion.

"Your own system of education," he said, "has been so eminently successful, has been attended by such happy results, that I cannot wonder you should feel inclined to look down on those less fortunate than yourself. I suppose when any father wishes to know how to train his son, I had better send him on to you."

Mr. Arlathnot started as if he had been struck, and put out his hands in a blind and trembling way, grasping then with them the top of the chair by which he stood. For some while he struggled in vain to move his lips, his breath forming only long, gasping sobs instead of words, and though his self-

control conquered at last, he turned to a death-like paleness whilst he spoke.

"I did not think," he said, in a low and muttered voice, "that you would speak—like that—to me." Then, with a growing excitement that brought the blood back quickly to his face, "Very well; let it be so then. Blame me as you like. I thank God that at any rate the worst blame cannot be mine. I thank God with all my heart and soul that no hardness of mine ever drove my son to sin."

There was a long silence.

"I suppose," said Arlathnot, in a cold and still voice, and with his eyes upon the ground, "that there is no longer any occasion for me to remain here. If I am to get back to my lodgings in time for luncheon I had better start at once."

"You had better," said Mr. Harman, in a voice as still and proud as that in which his companion had spoken.

Arlathnot looked at him as if uncertain whether or not to put out his hand, and then left the room.

Unmoved, Mr. Harman listened as the footsteps of his companion went out into the hall—unmoved, with a silent, frowning face that had no more wavering in it than was in the strong hand that rested on the table by which he stood. But the narrow hall echoed now to hasty footsteps, and Mr. Arlathnot entered again silently and quickly, and, going up to the table, laid his own fingers upon the hand that rested there.

“I can’t help it,” he said breathlessly, as if the inward struggle were almost too great for words; “I can’t leave you like this, that’s all. Come, I was the first wrong; I had no right to pass my judgment on what seemed best to you. Only, if you care at all for me, don’t—don’t speak to me as you did, or we can never see each other at all; you must know that. I sometimes feel as if it must kill me still. Come, I say I was first wrong; will you not forgive me?”

“You’re a good fellow, Philip,” cried the other, clasping in both his hands the fingers that had rested on his own. “I always said

you were, and I think so now. You shall do as you please with me about this, indeed you shall, and " —

And perhaps Meg had been more on his mind and conscience than he would willingly have owned, for as he sat down again he covered his face with his hands and burst into tears.

Arlathnot did not leave the house for some hours after that, and before he did all plans of action had been agreed upon between them. He was himself to take the whole trouble of inquiries and of search, Mr. Harman's pride only insisting upon the payment of a share at least in the expenses. Then Meg, once found (if she did not get tired of her folly and return herself), was to be conducted back to her uncle's house till all necessary apologies and humiliation had been endured, after which she was to be informed for the first time of the interest taken in her by her father's friend.

"I should like you to think," said Arlathnot, in a low voice, "that in *any case* my house will be open to her." "Come, cheer

up," were his parting words; "this is only a baby's freak, from all you say. We will save her from the consequences of her folly, and she shall thank us yet."

"That door has been shutting in my ears all day," whispered Kitty to Binia, as they brushed their hair together in their bedroom that night.

"That's nonsense," said Binia, who was her father's daughter in more ways than one.

"But I can't help it," twisting her long fair hair between her fingers as she spoke. "I can't help thinking . . . that if we never hear of her again . . . it may seem to us . . . that we were not always . . . quite kind" —

And then she stopped.

Ah, the vague self-reproach that comes behind the door that has been shut! But time passed on; the young ladies went down with their father to their country home; harvest time drew near; guests came for shooting; and, "like as a dream" that is over, the wanderer who had once shared their life became forgotten.



## CHAPTER VIII.

It was a lovely summer's noon when Meg, who had left the train at the little village of —, set out to walk towards the town.

The long journey, so exultant in its escape, and yet so strange and terrible in its loneliness, was over now at last. The endless houses, dingy with the morning smoke, the backs of villas and of factories, the bits of trees and meadows with London perpetually breaking out in the midst of them, as if there were no getting rid of it at all, the great town near which the battle was fought, and then the open country lying in mists and morning sunlight, and beautiful in its silence as unspoken hopes—all these things were over.

The sense of escape was exultant, the quick rush of the train seemed to be triumphing for her—but Meg was not used to travelling alone; she sat crouched up

near the window with vague terrors in her heart.

Well, it was over, the train journey, its one change, its final getting out at last ; and the porter to whom she had spoken with such an agony of heart-beats had been kind and civil, and had known her old nurse when she had lived near the village station, and could even give her address in the cathedral town to which she had gone, though he had not seen or heard of her for three years and more.

It had scarcely occurred to Meg to consider what she should do if Mrs. Clarke could not be found, and the sense of this came over her all at once with the cold, backward thrust of a danger that has passed. Well, she had the address at any rate ; she would soon now have found her home.

So she began to walk.

It was a lovely August noontide ; the sun flashed upon the river by which she went, and bathed the corn-fields in golden light ; there were wide blue distances against the

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sky, the trees far and near were grey and green, and far away, dim against a bank of faint, hot clouds, rested the cathedral towers. Earth was beautiful as fairyland, and to Meg, too, there was a sort of fairy sense; she was alone and free in the midst of all the beauty.

If only —


How shall I describe that faint sense of fear, growing ever stronger as she walked, that was beginning to stir down in the depths of her childish heart? She had walked a very little way when she stood still all at once. The sun flashed on the river, on the golden corn-fields, the earth was still beautiful round her, but her face was troubled, and her lips quivered like those of a naughty child. She began to walk again, but the sense of childish triumph was troubled now.

That is a terrible feeling that so small a cause as a lonely path, or the mere sense even of being alone, can give to a child—the *lost* feeling that only, perhaps, children know. What, then, must have been the thoughts of

Meg ? She had cut off her past life from behind her ; she was alone, in literal truth, in a strange place, and no sense of power to guide rose up to help her young, bewildered brain. Where was she going ? Where would she rest that night ? A strange feeling came over her as if she must stretch out her arms to the corn-fields and the beauty and entreat them to help her, and with that, too, a perplexity as if she were a heroine in a story-book, and oh ! had all the heroines in the story-books felt this misery too ?

All at once she began crying, standing still there in the hot path by the river's side. She cried for a'long time, and very bitterly, asking herself again and again where she was going, and what she was going to do. Perhaps the tears and sobs relieved her ; she felt better when they were done at last. No ; she had resolved, she would never go back to her uncle's house. With this hard pride as her only strength she began to walk once more towards the town.

It felt all like some strange sort of vision,



the hot sun beating down upon her tired head, the trees and corn-fields round, the distant chimneys beneath the hill, and the hot shivering gleams upon the cathedral towers that stood out above in pale brightness against the clouds like a dream within a dream. She was very tired, it seemed as if she had scarcely strength to drag her feet along, and yet she dared not rest. Oh, if she were only with Mrs. Clarke, she said to herself whilst the tears rolled down her cheeks, she would be happy then.

And then she was in the town, in the High Street—like a vision changed—and there were cars and traffic, and the noise of people, and some wedding bells rang out on the air, and it seemed to her as if everyone had a home and work but her. And the sunlight was there too, beating down on the street, and she reached a bridge that had a great dingy drinking-fountain, and steps leading down from the High Street to the river, and looking down along the dull green water it seemed as if there rose *already* in her tired

heart the whispered prompting that some rest at least lay there.

No, Meg was still but a child, and the whispered wickedness of despair had no real meaning for her. She went wearily onwards through the town, asking her way at every interval. Beyond the High Street was one cool bit of road where shadows of houses fell; she passed that, and began to mount the hill. Blinding glare was here, heat beating on her back and head, it seemed as if she had no strength to get to the top.

Half-way up she paused. She had reached an almost deserted bit of road, too steep for any traffic except that of the few foot-passengers who went up or down the narrow hot pavement with a wooden railing to assist their steps. A red garden-wall was on one side of her, and from within that a great chestnut stretched its branches above over the pavement, over the rough piece of unused road, on to another garden-wall beyond. The sun came flickering between the leaves, making chequered lights and shadows on the

ground; she stood still, and turning round saw the hot gleaming light on the roofs and houses below. Then gathering up her courage she went wearily on once more.

Past the cathedral towers, rising above the dark, quaint archway on her right; past the rough open space from which, looking down between lines of houses, she could see the blue distant country. She was getting near to her destination now. And now she tried hard—poor Meg!—to feel as if she were near a home, but the long street was unfamiliar, and the dark alleys down which she peered with frightened eyes had no look of welcome for her.

“Dick’s Alley”—she had reached the place at last. And here she stood still, not daring even to look down it for a while. It was a dark place, scarcely three feet wide, with red dark house-walls on each side of it. But beyond she could just catch a glimpse of a little court with the sunlight on it, and a child sitting on the ground with the light upon its hair. That gave her courage, and

with fast beating heart she left the street and went down the darkness of the alley. Oh! if she could only find Mrs. Clarke at last. She could be happy then.

And now she stood in the courtyard, with tottering houses round her, and the dirty, ragged child sprawling on the ground at her feet. And from out of one of the houses came a young girl, such a young girl as Meg had never seen before, dressed in faded pink, bareheaded, with pale, bold eyes, her friz of hair tied with streamers of dirty blue ribbon, and a great pie in a dish in her hand. She went by, honoured Meg with one bold, long stare as she passed, and went to the door of one of the houses. Meg, grown desperate, made a step towards her as she stood there.

"What d'ye want?" asked the young lady with another stare, supporting the pie on her bent knee, whilst she made a lunge with one hand at the ribbons which were streaming.

"I want—only—only Mrs. Clarke," faltered Meg, almost too shy to speak.



But now came sounds of a disturbance from within.

"I say, Sal, look sharp," roared a man's voice, and the young lady, starting up, gathered up the pie into her arms and disappeared.

Meg stood still, frightened, breathless, burning with blushes, not knowing what to do. But the glow of the sunlight, the stifling heat of the little court, and the sense of her own position there, were too painful to be borne. She went to one of the houses on her right hand, not daring to venture on the place whence the man's voice had come.

A neat servant, dressed in black, and with a tidy brooch, answered her timid knock. Her manner was quietly respectful, there was some comfort in that.

"Is there anything I can do for you, miss?" she said.

"Oh, please, I only wanted to know if Mrs. Clarke lived here?"

"Mrs. Clarke? No, miss."

Meg stood still, holding her lips tightly

together lest she should cry. Oh, would there never come an end to this ?

"I'll go ask the missus," said the girl, who seemed kind and concerned, as if she felt that something was wrong.

She disappeared accordingly, and presently there came to the doorway a little old lady in a black dress, with a great oval ivory brooch that had a painted landscape of rivers and trees upon it, and made a little sort of curtesy there. She had a great deal of manner, but what there was was kind.

"Is there anything I can do for you, loove?" she said, with a broad, pretty accent that gave softness to her words.

"Oh, if you would, please, tell me only if Mrs. Clarke lives here?"

"Mrs. Clarke—Clarke, lovey? She lived here in this very mortal house, and left it agone two year and more."

Meg was silent, but after one half-minute her enforced self-control could endure no more.

"Oh, don't cry; now don't, now," said

the little old lady. "Is it anything very bad you wants her for?"

"If you could only tell me where she lives," sobbed Meg.

No, the old lady could not, but Dick could. Oh yes, her son Dick could tell. And would she not coom in out of the soon, and sit doon and rest her for a bit? Meg obeyed, and sat down in a chair in the passage by the door. It was all a strange dream, she had scarcely strength left even for despairing now.

And then Dick came in; a strong, shambling young man, with so much flour on his coat that he must have had something to do in the baking line. He gave his information directly, without being asked, in a strong, hoarse voice, that sounded as if some of the flour had got into his throat as well. Mrs. Clarke? Oh, yes, she had lived there, but she had gone to Bretick, in the middle of England, two years ago.

"And she did leave me this that I might write her if I would," he said, holding out a crumpled envelope, on which a few words

were scrawled. "If it's any service to you you're welcome to that, I'm sure."

Meg took it with a movement of her hand that was faint and weary as her hope was now. Her head felt sick and faint with fatigue and want of food, the ground trembled beneath her, and she seemed to have no more strength left with which to guide herself. Perhaps the sense of something strange had begun to strike the little old lady, who had come into the passage to help, for there was a different tone in her voice when she spoke.

"We can send you woord about Mrs. Clarke," she said, "if you will tell us where is your hoom."

The suspicion, scarcely conscious as it must have been, struck with sudden sharpness upon Meg, and produced one of those quick actions that surprise us with ourselves.

"Oh, thank you; it does not matter. I must be going," she said; and in another instant she was in the street, and the little old lady, and the tottering court, and Dick,

were gone from her like shadows that we have passed.

Half-an-hour later she was on the bridge in the High Street once more, though how she had got there she scarcely knew. The glare of the sunlight was round her, and there was the noise of people and of carts, but all was dark and confused, and her head seemed to tremble as she stood. In fact she was faint, a feeling never known to her before. She had eaten nothing all day save one biscuit bought at the station in the morning, chiefly because—if you will believe it!—the courage that had induced her to leave her home was not strong enough to guide her into a strange shop to ask for food. She stood leaning against the dingy stone parapet by the drinking fountain, whilst the ceaseless noise and footsteps passed by her. And then suddenly a man from out of the crowd stopped, looked at her, hesitated, and spoke.

“Have you lost anything?” he asked.

He was a young or middle-aged man,

whose rank in life could not easily be determined at once. He spoke respectfully, raising his hat as he did so. And then, all at once—her youth perhaps, or her forlorn look, altering his first impression—his face suddenly changed. He came close, with a peculiar smile on his lips, though he seemed still to wish to please.

“Can I be of any assistance to you, my dear?” he said.

Meg had never in her life been so addressed by a man before, and the sudden familiarity of his tone gave her a new and sharp alarm. She started back, pressing herself by this means against the stone parapet, a very useless movement, that was, however, followed by quick relief, for a group of men at some distance called to her new acquaintance, and he retired. Trembling still with terror, she was able for the first time to look round her, and to perceive that she was not even now alone.

A boy stood by her, a schoolboy as it appeared, with a little stick in one hand and

some books in a strap over his shoulder in the other. He seemed twelve or fourteen, not more; he had a bright, open face, and his first words gave a protecting reason for his presence near her.

“Did that man there hurt you,” he said, “when you jumped back like that?”

Meg was not frightened this time, but the words seemed kind, and she was forlorn enough to find even a mere child’s kindness too much for her self-control to bear. Yet she tried to answer as quietly as she could.

“No—no—only he spoke to me.”

A little sob came, and with her hand she rubbed the tears away.

“Did you know him?” asked the boy, still suspicious of intended harm.

“No.”

“It was like his impudence then, whoever he is, to speak to you.”

Something in the warmth of these words gave them a cheering sound. Meg raised her blue eyes and smiled.

The schoolboy, brimful of admiration, full

too of the manhood that he fancied already developed, stood by her with a protecting manner.

- “Haven’t you anyone to be with you?” he said in lordly tones.

Meg had been sick and faint for sympathy ; she answered his question simply, as a child replies when it is spoken to.

“I haven’t any home now,” she said, and her eyes looked at him with a mute appeal for pity.

But the boy gave no response at all ; he seemed only to be lost in thought.

Shall we blame him ? He was altogether overcome with the novelty of the position, with the sense of a princess in a fairy tale that had entered suddenly into the familiar dingy High Street that all his life had known. And now, what was he to do with his enchantress ? He could not leave her, admiration and young chivalry were too strong for that. Could he then take her to his own home, and offer her a shelter there ? His home had strict rules, and an unknown



wanderer would not be too easily received. It passed through his mind to wonder what his mother and his Aunt Lucy would say to her, and what his father might possibly do to him. Still he could think of nothing else.

"I can't offer you much," he said, raising his head with a touch of real dignity in his boyish manner now, "still, if you would come home with me" —

"Oh, I must go on to Bretick," Meg hastened to reply, ashamed to see the sense in which her appeal could be received. "I am so very much obliged to you, but a friend of mine lives there."

"Bretick? That's a long way from here, ain't it?" enquired the boy; "somewhere in the middle of England, do you mean?"

"Oh, I ought to go there at once, and I am so tired. Could you tell me which way the station is?"

"The station? Oh, yes," and then, in answer to some scarcely conscious alarm her face expressed; "My master told me to get

back at once, but I can go as far as that with you if you would like it best."

So they set out walking together, the dark-haired, bright-faced boy, with his books slung over his shoulder, and Meg, weary with the weight of troubles that hung upon her steps, clinging to this young companionship as if it meant real hope for her. Yet she had not lost all thought for others, or perhaps sorrow was teaching her some lessons even already, for a sudden thought came over her, and at once she stopped.

"Will he be very angry with you?" she asked in faltering tones.

"He? Oh, no. I don't care a bit for him. We had better go on, or we may miss a train, you know. It isn't my father," he explained, as they went on once more. "It's only old Griddles, my tutor below the hill. He *will* be in a wax, but I don't care a bit for that."

"A wax?" asked Meg timidly, thinking she had not heard.

"What! don't you know what that

means?" the boy enquired. "A *wax*. It means—means—why it means what leads to 'em, you know. Come now, that's rather good," he added with great enjoyment; "I never said anything of that kind before."

But Meg was sick at heart, and the atrocious schoolboy wit had no sort of sense for her.

So they reached the station. A train for Bretick was at that moment standing by the platform, as a porter informed the boy, and the young guardian led the way to it at once. Meg whispered, with some burning shame, that she would like a third-class carriage, she had so little money left. But the schoolboy would not hear of this. Every lady travelled first, he said, when she went alone. And he would find her such a nice carriage where she would be quite by herself; it would be so much best for her.

"See now," he said, when he had helped her in and let down the glass, and drawn the blue curtains to keep out the sun, "how nice and comfortable you are; and now you have

only to keep still and I will get your ticket for you."

"Oh, stop," cried Meg, thinking he had forgotten, "you have not got my purse."

The boy looked at her for an instant, then took it and went. He returned directly with the ticket, and with some buns and a small meat pie as well, that he placed down on the next seat to her with especial pride.

"Are you sure you will be comfortable where you are going to?" he asked, when her faltering thanks were over, blushing very much with the effort a direct question cost.

"Oh, yes," Meg replied, "I shall be quite happy when I have found my friend.

The train began to move.

"Oh, I say, stop," cried the boy, running after it, "I wanted to ask" —

Doubtless at the very last moment he had remembered that his beautiful day-dream had no name or address at all. The train steamed mercilessly on, and he was left. Let us hope that Mr. Griddles, if that was indeed his name, did not too severely illustrate the pun.

The train had gone some way when Meg remembered to count her money, that she might see how much the journey cost. Then at first, and for some little time, she imagined that she must have made some mistake as to the amount of money her purse had contained. For not only was that not diminished, but her purse was rendered more bulky by six large coppers that had not been there before.

Others might have had more reason to be surprised at the smallness of the sum, but indeed, after paying for a first-class ticket and a meat pie and some buns, no more than that was likely to be left of a schoolboy's purse. . . .

The long, weary afternoon passed, and the sun began to cast slanting shadows over the unfamiliar country. Meg thought with a sick, tired longing, of the many happier people who knew in what beds they would sleep when night should come. So much had happened since the morning, it seemed almost natural that she should wander now.

## CHAPTER IX.

HOLBIS let his pen fall with an impatient sigh.

It was getting very dark in the little room in which he worked, the one room that made study, bedroom, parlour, and all other sorts of rooms for him. The little wooden bedstead, on which he had flung himself once that day, worn out with heat and impatient work, and which had been half-broken by his weight thus suddenly received, rested in shadows now : the heavy boots that he had kicked on one side looked larger and blacker in the twilight ; he got up with another sigh, that was just able to stir a little the massive shoulders that had bent over his writing all that day, and went to the window to find there what relief he could.

Oh, what a prison a small room can be in the summer time ! He had got up in the morning with the resolve that he would not leave his one apartment until his work was done, and there he had sat through all the day,

his hair tangled, his beard uncombed, his coat flung on the bed, his blue shirt sleeves pushed up to the elbows, that his bare, muscular arms might have all the coolness they could get, cursing the heat at intervals, whilst he wrote platitudes concerning the beauty of the summer.

He had arranged with the editor of a small London paper that he would write a set of articles on rural scenes, an arrangement that had come in very timely sort to a man much in need of funds, but which had nevertheless nearly reached a premature conclusion because the editor, whilst agreeing to pay for his journey down from London, had refused to provide for his lodging in the country too. It was in consequence of this economy on the part of the editor, that Holbis had only one room in which to write and sleep as well.

Now he stood at the open window, receiving there the consolation of a small breeze, black with smuts from neighbouring chimneys, and heavy, moreover, with some very bad tobacco that was being smoked in the

room below. It was a little, a very little yard on which he looked, hung from one end to the other with lines of clothes, which a small and untidy servant girl was rescuing from the evening dews. Beyond, and almost shutting out the twinkling lights of the small town, a row of great poplars stood straight, dark and lank against the sky. Holbis knew the whole scene by heart, yard, servant girl, clothes-lines and poplars too, and perhaps for that reason they had lost for him any charm they might otherwise have had. He turned away from them, took up a stick that lay upon the floor, and standing at his door gave some heavy blows upon the floor of the passage. For he desired to summon his landlady, having decided that a jug of beer might impart a feeling of poetry to his concluding lines.

In a few moments footsteps came up the stairs, and Mrs. Gay stood upon the threshold of his room, a tall woman, in a shabby black dress and a widow's cap, with thin grey straggling hairs on her forehead, a depressed manner, and a mouth whose corners turned habi-



tually down, assisting thus a disposition to deliver every sentence in a whine. The lapse of years had in no degree produced resemblance between herself and her husband's name, the term Mrs. Sad would have been much more appropriate to her.

Such, however, as she was, she stood at Holbis's door with a tallow candle in her hand, and he expressed to her his desire and necessity for beer. It would not have been Mrs. Gay if she had granted his request without some objections first.

"I'm sure I don't know what to do for you, sir," she said. "I dunno what's come to Ned, and Sallie's at the clothes, and if it was ever so I couldn't leave the house myself. And if you would excuse my speaking to you, sir"—with more solemnity now—"if you would care a little less for the drink"—

Holbis interrupted with an impatient exclamation that caused Mrs. Gay to retreat as if she had heard the distant growl of a wild beast, which noise indeed the sound resembled in no slight degree.

"Here, wait a minute," he said; "if you'll tell me where Ned is likely to be, I'll put on my coat and go and look for him myself."

"I'm sure I can't say, sir," said Mrs. Gay, returning to her usual whine. "And there's a young woman at the door, too, a-askin' questions. I don't know no young women. Perhaps she's a friend of yours, sir."

Mrs. Gay, being a lady of strict virtue, was accustomed to throw out these chance shafts to assault her neighbours.

"*I* know no young women here," said Holbis, stirring his enormous shoulders and laughing. "So—where's that coat of mine? Get down the stairs, will you? and see to the girl, and I'll come after and look for Ned."

Mrs. Gay accordingly descended the stairs, and Holbis followed, dragging his coat over his arms as he went. Below the pert tones of Sallie could be heard, and then another voice. For one half-minute they both stood still to listen.

"You say Mrs. Clarke did once live here—

could you please tell me where she is living now?"

Such a soft, childish voice—so different in tone and manner from any he had ever heard in that house before. Holbis gave an involuntary start, and then, leaving Mrs. Gay to go on downstairs, turned into the room by which he stood. It was an unlet and deserted sitting-room, quite dark at that hour of the evening; he groped his way to the open window, from which could be seen only too plainly the lighted rooms across the two or three feet street. He did not look into these, but, leaning on the sill, directed his gaze downwards to where a slight, childish figure in black stood by the door. The soft tones were speaking again now, in answer to Mrs. Gay, as it appeared.

"My name is Harman. I have come all this way to find Mrs. Clarke—oh, could you tell me where she is?"

"Mrs. Clarke as used to live i' this house? I can tell 'oo," said the pert Sallie, "if 'oo wish to know."

"Oh, if you only could tell me," with reviving hope, "I should be so glad."

"She lives i' the centry now. Ho—ho" —

"Ah, dear," said Mrs. Gay, fitting the occasion to her mournfulness at once, "it's too true, is that. Dead and buried a year an' more."

*"Dead!—buried!"*

She raised her head with a startled motion as she spoke the words, a light fell on her face from the one gas-lamp of which the street could boast, and Holbis, looking down, saw beneath the bent black hat the fair, childish features. With the same impulse she had raised her hand, her black sleeve had dropped a little, and his eyes caught sight also of the dainty fairness of her wrist. No fitting inmate for Catteat Street was this.

"Oh, is it really true, do tell me?" Her voice was trembling now.

"Dead on a cramp," said Mrs. Gay, "and on pains i' her legs too, by reason of her age. It was me as come to th' house the day after her burrial was done."

"Oh, what shall I do, what shall I do?"

Holbis's ears caught the whispered, despairing cry, and he felt it vibrate as if it touched some fibre of his own; he held his breath to hear what would come next.

"Oh, I did hope I was going to stay with her. What can I do?"

"I can't say, I'm sure," said Mrs. Gay, whose respect for the stranger seemed to decrease with this knowledge of her loneliness. "I can't stay talking here at this hour o' night, you know."

"Oh, but do tell me where I ought to go. I don't know this place; if you would only please to tell me?"

"I can't say, I'm sure," said Mrs. Gay.

"Couldn't I stay here just for one night? I can pay for it; indeed, I can."

"We don't take in strangers here," whined Mrs. Gay, with one step backwards, as if she were about to shut the door in the stranger's face.

So, indeed, she would have done had not Holbis at this instant leant out of the

window and taken part in the conversation too.

“Hollo, there!”

All the three below started and looked up at him. And he, looking down on them all, scarcely saw the familiar faces of Mrs. Gay and Sallie, his glance falling only on the lovely childish features on which again the gaslight shone.

“I say, Mrs. Gay, there,” he said, “before you finish talking just come up here for one instant and speak to me.”

Mrs. Gay gave a prolonged inarticulate whine, but Holbis was not a lodger to be despised; she left the door and came with gasps up the stairs. Holbis turned away from the window as she entered the room, coming to meet her that those below might not hear the words they said.

“Now then,” he said, “look here. You take that young girl in.”

Mrs. Gay was beginning to remonstrate, but he interrupted her before she could speak a word.

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"I'm a good lodger to you," he said. "You've had me, off and on, these three years and more. You take that young woman in. She can't do any harm to you, a child like that; and it's too late to turn her out in the streets to seek for lodgings now."

Mrs. Gay, without deigning more particular objections, intimated only in general and melancholy terms, that she was a widow woman, and that times was bad.

"I'll see you don't lose by her," said Holbis, "if that's all you mean. She says herself she can pay you, and I'll be bound she can. Come now, she'll go away if you stand maundering here. Go down and let her in; she'll do no harm to you."

Well, if it was to please him—and there was the bed in the passage she might have, and she didn't like strangers nohow—she never did.

Holbis waited to hear no more, but turned impatiently away, standing still, however, in the passage, that he might be sure she went downstairs to the door. Then, relieved on

that point, he went to his own room, and lay down on his bed to think. No thoughts of his still uncompleted work were in his mind as he lay face downwards with his head buried in the massive arms that crushed in his pillow. No, but the fair child-features, with the hard gas-light upon them, distinct even now to him in the darkness, and the blue appealing eyes . . . and she had no home to which to go. . . . It was a long while before he could compose himself sufficiently to rise and sit down with sullen resolution to his unfinished work once more.

Meg, meanwhile, had been conducted to the kitchen, where a bright fire blazed, for after the hot day a cold, damp night had come. A drizzling rain had been on her as she stood in the street; she sat now pressed close against the great fireplace in a weary, timid attitude, with her arms upon her knees, her black damp dress clinging to her, her fair, soft hair loose and roughened, and her eyes staring hard into the fire—a frightened, lovely, dreaming creature. The three women in the



kitchen cast many glances at each other as she sat, and whispered amongst each other, without taking too great heed lest she should hear.

But Meg was not aware of them, would not have heard had the whispers been much louder than they were. This partial rest had only made more defined to her the state of excited tension into which all her life had passed, and with that vivid, painful distinctness with which outward objects can impress themselves on certain moods, she could still see in front of her the dark narrow street and the lighted windows by which she had stood when she had heard that Mrs. Clarke was dead. It was only after a long while she became slowly conscious that there were others in the room with her, that the tall woman in the widow's cap was watching her with cold, suspicious eyes, that the pert Sallie was clattering plates on to the long white table, and that Miss Rint, the other lodger, was sitting astride a chair, with her arms clasped on the back of her head, and her

legs much too wide apart for grace, laughing heartily at some jokes she herself had made.

Now entered two men with pipes, and at sight of them Meg, forced by inward horror, rose trembling from her chair. Yet in spite of that horror, and spite, too, of fatigue and despair, it cost her a great effort to say in faltering tones that she was very tired—she would like to be shown where she could sleep. She looked round with frightened, lonely eyes on the rest, who seemed all so strange to her. Miss Rint stared, Sallie stood with arms akimbo, and answered her with a hoarse laugh; but Mrs. Gay, mindful, perhaps, of Holbis, lighted a tallow candle and prepared to show her to her room at once. It was Miss Rint's bed, so she informed her. Miss Rint was going to-morrow, and would sleep with Sallie for to-night. Meg, hearing this, looked timidly towards her benefactress, but had no words for thanks.

“And if you'll take my advice, dear,” said Miss Rint, “you'll have a sup o' beer before you go.”

She spoke kindly, and Meg, ready at that moment for any protection, looked towards her with frightened, grateful eyes. But now one of the men, roused to a sense of humour, hoped, with a wink, that he was not "skarrin' miss away;" and then Sallie laughed, and Miss Rint slapped her loudly on the back, and there was great commotion and delight—Meg hastening away from it all with instinctive horror, her face burning as if she were ashamed. Oh, so strange, so lonely! What would be the end of all this for her?

Mrs. Gay, following with the candle, conducted her upstairs, up and up, till it seemed to the weary guest that she could find no rest at all. And after all it was not a bedroom that they reached, only a bit of passage by the head of the stairs, with the attic door on the right hand of it, a small bed made up on the floor, a jug and basin on the floor as well, and a little square of looking-glass on a nail against the wall. This was Miss Rint's apartment. Mrs. Gay set down the candle on the floor for want of a chair, wished her

guest good-night in a doleful tone, and went downstairs. And Meg, as soon as she was sure that she was gone, sat down upon the bed, and, hiding her face in her hands, gave way to the agony of crying that her solitude permitted her at last.

After all, the tears were a relief; there is a wonderful reaction against despair in childish minds. She raised her head, too tired not to be comforted, and began her preparations for the night. Alas! that under the circumstances these had to be so few! First, she said a few broken words on her knees, her fatigue permitting no more prayers than that; then she took off her dusty boots and stockings, curling up her bare feet inside her damp skirts; then she let down her fair, soft hair, pulling out the tangles with her fingers as best she could. After all there was something pleasant in the sense of freedom, and roughness, and caring for herself—the *picnic* sense that we all like sometimes—and though fresh tears came with the delicious rest of laying down her

head on a pillow at last, they were not altogether so despairing as they had been. She was freed, at least, from her uncle's home, whose misery she could not forget even in this other misery now, and she had some money left, and she would work and teach. The darkness in which she closed her eyes, too tired yet to sleep, had its visions still.

But now came footsteps and voices below, Miss Rint and Sallie were coming up to bed. Meg started up at first, but on second thoughts lay down once more, with her eyes closed and her face turned towards the wall. So lying she heard them mount the stairs, take some steps towards the attic door, and then stand—doubtless to look at her. But Meg lay still.

"What is she, do you think?" asked the voice of Sallie.

"No good," said the other.

They went on into the attic and closed the door.

But Meg had risen, had started up with an involuntary motion as soon as she heard

that the door was closed, and sat now upon her bed, her bare feet white in the gloom, her hair falling upon her shoulders, and her face burning as if some slow fire had been kindled there. For the first instant she had felt a longing to rush into the next room, to confront the others, and ask them what they *meant*, even now she looked with longing eyes at the door under which the light was shining, and only her beating heart kept her from entering there. Oh, how could it be possible to them? What did they mean at all by thinking that she did not look good? She was good.

It was a new experience to her—this first touch of a woman's shame, first knowledge of the careless words that pierce and thrust at those who are unprotected in the world. For long hours she sat upon her bed, with her hands clasped beneath her chin, long after the light had ceased to shine beneath the attic door, and the rough voices and laughter had died into quietness behind it. Only one or two slow tears would come at

last, not child's tears now, and as she laid down her head in the darkness, worn out with trouble and fatigue, it seemed to her despairing thought that something had broken within her ; she must be old and grave now, and would never be able to be a child again.

Yet, she had escaped from her uncle's home, that gave some comfort still. So she laid her head down in the darkness, resting her soft, small hand under her cheek, that she might make the pillow seem less hard, so murmured again some broken words of prayer, and so whilst she seemed to see still before her closed eyes the little town with the evening shadows on it and the great poplars in the streets, felt the night grow deeper and darker round her till she slept.

## CHAPTER X.

· АН, poor wanderer, on the verge of so many dangers, tossed out on the uncertain sea of a new existence, why, after all, should we concern ourselves with you? Life has pleasanter things than these, in a narrower circle it may be, but still more soft to tell. We have not much as a rule to do with the dark corners of the world, we like our fashionable society, our good manners and our dinner parties—of these things it is our choice to hear. Let us then, for a while at least, refresh ourselves with these before we return perforce to the harder, darker life and to our wanderer again.

Very soft and pleasant was the summer in Mr. Harman's home that year, very brilliant the flowers that shone in sudden corners of the dark garden, like flashes of colour in the night. The great Gloire de Dijon roses nodded delicate heads upon the old red house, the sunlight glittered upon the stream below



the meadow, the croquet lawn stretched smooth and soft to the feet of the yew trees that rested dark beyond.

Every morning a little grey donkey with a roller behind him went up and down that lawn, his little hoofs carefully tied up in wash-leather, that the grass might not be hurt. Later on in the day, a whole assemblage of people shared the profits of his work—there were many more guests than usual in the house that year, and in the evenings the flashings of silk and jewels in the dark gardens rivalled the colours of the flowers. These invitations to many visitors, each as far as was possible of rank or wealth, were a natural consequence due to the growing charms of Mr. Harman's daughters. In plainer words, it was getting time that Mr. Harman's daughters should be married.

And very soft and smooth was their path to matrimony made—bright and dim as the white shimmering mists that the sun drew from the park in the early morning. No one woke to see the gleaming loveliness of

these morning mists; blinds and curtains were kept obstinately closed, whilst those behind them lingered long and late in the refined slumbers of those who have no bread for which to toil. Late on in the morning, however, it was permitted even to refinement to have breakfast—a late, pleasant breakfast, bright with flowers and gay guests and summer ribbons, and plans for the day, whose many hours of amusement were all before them then. Afterwards came such pretence of employment as suited with the severe dignity of morning hours, a little practising and fancy work, a little housekeeping and feeding of birds and monkeys—Meg's poor pet monkey, who would never be good with anyone now she was gone. After such toilsome tasks it was natural that they should take their ease when once the noon had come.

And truly they were pleasant times, those summer afternoons. There was the great carriage in which to drive to the nearest town, wide-seated, softly cushioned, drawn by an old and handsome pair of greys, who went

their own steady pace whatever the driver might desire. Miss Harman preferred her own two beautiful spirited ponies, liked them all the better because no one in the family could drive them but herself. Almost every afternoon she drove out now, accompanied by some favoured guest—a lady of course, to show the beauties of the country. Up hill and down vale they went, amongst dark trees and golden corn-fields, with wide views of towns and villages or little distant dreaming peeps of country between the hills—often not returning till the dark trees of the park were bathed in the yellow slanting light of the declining sun. Then, the park once passed, they would catch glimpses between the branches of the bright colours of dresses or hear the distant laughter and chatter of the groups upon the croquet lawn, and when they had descended and found tea and cake all ready for them in the hall, there would be just time for one game before the dressing-gong should sound. Binia would stay on the croquet lawn for all the afternoon, for she

played very well, and was glad besides to get such opportunities of flirtations as daylight would grant, her complexion, unlike her sisters', being very bad at night. Kittie was famous at billiards, and liked to challenge captains and majors to matches in the billiard-room, where, whether from chivalry or otherwise, her success was great. Miss Harman took little part in these gaieties all through the day—she waited till the evening came.

Then, proud and self-contained as she always was, some sense of youthful excitement could find its way to her. She liked to sit in her own room for a few minutes before ringing for her maid, the glass in front of her, her silk bodice closely fastened, her dark hair tossed back in heaps on her white, bare shoulders, and her eyes shining with the quivering light of coming triumphs. Little tokens of those thoughts remained when, with her head and slender neck erect, her arms and neck gleaming with jewels, her dress rustling, rich and delicate, behind her,

and her manner proud and composed as became her state, she descended the stairs to take her place as mistress of her father's house.

So came the evening with lights, flowers, and silver in the dining-room, with music, singing, games, subdued voices and laughter in the drawing-room when the long dinner time was over. There were moonlight excursions on the river below the house, or wanderings on to the terrace in the still calmness of the night, or impromptu dances and charades in the great music-room that seemed so made for sport. Nor were there wanting gentlemen to bend over Miss Harman's pages as she sat, graceful, at the piano, or to whisper satire and mirth into the willing ears of Miss Kittie, or even to turn over endless photographs under the guidance of Miss Binia. But it was the stately Anna who attracted the greatest admiration after all. And when the long evening was done, and the younger sisters retired to chatter together in their room she liked to sit alone in hers, the

wide stillness of the night beyond her open windows, the breath of roses and honeysuckle stealing in like the perfume of incense in the room, smiling in the stillness to herself, whilst her thoughts wandered idly as they would. And when it got too late even for such dreams as these, it was pleasant to prepare slowly and dreamily for rest, and so lying down with limbs tired out with pleasure, to sink into sleep as soft and bright as hopes and dreams themselves.

Pleasant summer days, pleasant idle golden time of young hopes and fancies undisturbed by care or toil. Let us leave these things and return to our wanderer again.

## CHAPTER XI.

NOR, though our way, finding its own crooked path in its perversity, must needs wind and grope amongst what we have called the dark corners of the world, need we think that amongst those dark corners no romances can be found. Up the dark alleys, and down amongst streets too dull and narrow for our footsteps to tread in them, under the stifling breath of foundries, in little courts noisy with drunken words and staggering footsteps, wherever the sun can shine or the air of Heaven can breathe, romance will linger still. The romance of life, that is, and not of story books, because the beautiful flower in such scenes as these grows sometimes so sickly and distorted that it is not fair enough to be described.

Enough. Anna Harman, safe in her luxurious home, handsome, stately, an heiress almost, and the eldest daughter of her father, could command with some conscious

efforts such homage as she desired; that was all she needed, and to her that seemed enough. Her father's niece had cut herself off in mad perversity from what might have been brighter hopes than these, and yet, in spite of this enforced loneliness and this voluntary degradation, the danger of passionate, unsought affection waited still for Meg. Poor, lovely Meg, she had never thought to have to guard herself from such snares as these, and had never even imagined what perils for herself and others her childish beauty made. Do we doubt how this could be? Think for a moment of the house to which she had come—the dark house in the two or three feet street, shadowed always by the houses across the way—dismal with the dolefulness of its mistress, owning no other gaiety than the loud, rude jokes of the ill-trained servant girl with her acquaintances, both girls and men. Think of the mean, rough furniture, the dark rooms, the rough ways of the inhabitants, and of the place, and then, in the midst of all these things,

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let us think of Meg, her face pale and bewildered, indeed, with the change her escape had brought—a little hard and set to what it had been in her uncle's home—and yet, in spite of all, soft and childish yet, the soft, small lips quivering as children's do, the blue eyes ready to appeal at the smallest encouragement for help or pity, the enchantment of helplessness and beauty about her still. A small, delicate, bewildered thing she looked, lovely as a dream of fairyland in that dreary place, even so slight a matter as the little turns and dainty fairness of her wrist had something in them that nothing else in house or street could boast. I think that from that very first evening when her misguided footsteps first paused before the door, Holbis had promised himself to link his life with hers.

Can we not understand, to some extent at least, what he felt for her? Think what it would be to a man who had lived in darkness all his life to have suddenly before him a vision of the country in the spring time,

the sun drawing up the brightness of the mists, the trees in fresh young leaf, the thorn-bushes white with the glory of their blossom. Holbis in all his life had known no dreams till now. Day after day he watched her going about the house, pale, lonely, and perplexed, shrinking from all the rest, and yet, as he felt, in utmost need of help. And still he spoke no word to her, never came near to her, never openly showed that he even looked at her. He bided his time, and to his slow, strong nature the passionate force of his feeling seemed like a grasp upon her even then.

And now, before we go further, it will be necessary for us to know some more of him. Only we need expect no story of flowers, and gardens, and easy living now. Holbis had known nothing of such things through all his life.

He was the son of a mechanic in Birmingham, and in that dark, smoky town he had spent his boyhood, learning many things, for his father was one of those who have a

craving for knowledge, and the boy picked up bits and scraps from him. Unfortunately the older man had a craving also for drink, and after a time his wife sought that consolation too, and their one common taste, though unanimous, did not tend to peace. Holbis remained at home as long as his little sister lived, but when she died he left the house, one night and betook himself to London, where he had been before, and where the lad of twelve years old had some acquaintances even then. There, then, he lived, running errands at first, and, scanty as work was, scarcely more hungry than when he lived at home. He knew a lad who had relations in the newspaper line, and sold papers for a while himself, this action forming his first entrance into the *literary* society of the City. Afterwards he found employment in printers' offices, though many years passed before he ventured to write at all himself. It may be supposed that through all these years he found it hard to live, but his physical strength was always great, and

a hard, slow obstinacy of purpose and action did even more to help. His own acquaintances, rough and lawless as they mostly were, looked with some awe on him.

And so by slow degrees, working his way onwards always amidst the great City's turmoil, he found less hungry days, so found successive employment, wages, and even hopes; and so, learning at last to write for the types that he had set up so often, settled down to regular work and to respectability at last. And now if I were asked to add one more word that should describe him more closely, I should say of Holbis that he was still, as he had been through all his life, a heathen; by which word I do not mean, of course, in this instance, one who worships idols, for he had not belief enough for that, nor even one who is an atheist, for he had not speculation enough for that; but merely one who, on all occasions, makes his own nature his constant guide, and is troubled by no abstract theories about right or wrong at all. Holbis had done good and even noble

things in his twenty-eight years of life; he had loved his little sister when he was a boy, in later years he had left himself *not* enough to keep himself from hunger, in order that his widowed mother might not leave her home. But these things cost him no effort, they came as naturally to him as the fiercer feelings which also he took no trouble to restrain.

A slow, patient worker, a contributor to unknown magazines and still more commonplace newspapers, a dweller in dingy lodgings close to the City, it might well be supposed that little romance could find its way into such a life as this. Yet one unhappy circumstance there had been, which in a greater degree than he could ever realize, served to influence his life.

In his early days when he was fain to seek the society of such acquaintances as he could get, both male and female, he fell into some companionship with a girl who was the daughter of a waterman, and whose means of livelihood were even more scanty than his:

own. I believe that with herself he had only the very slightest intercourse, but he had some intimacy with her father, and others of her "people," as she called them, did various kind things for him. Afterwards, when he gained a more settled life, these rougher acquaintances were dropped or forgotten by degrees, and he heard no more of them. Save for one exception. He had been established for some years in a printer's office, when this girl whom he had known, her few friends dead or lost, and she herself in a state of want and desperation, found him out at last. Holbis, remembering old days, and taking pity on her forsaken state, gave her at first what money she desired. She made use of these gifts to establish still further claims, and night after night when he returned from work she would come to his lodgings to ask for him.

It is not in the nature of man to endure such persistence long, and yet for a while he seems to have borne it with tolerable patience—until at last, repulsed elsewhere,

she came even to his office, and he got into some discredit with his employers and companions through her. This final trial proved more than he could bear. Yet he gave no sign of anger—only that evening, instead of returning to his lodgings, he waited about in the streets till she passed by. Then, coming forwards to address her, he asked her to take a walk with him, to which she joyfully agreed. It was a November evening, dark and frosty; he led the way down to one of the bridges across the river. Standing still there by a lamp-post, he addressed her again for the first time, and told her that he had brought her there to take his final leave of her, and that it must be at her peril that she followed him, or spoke to him, or in any way interfered with him again. Having said these things, he walked away. She followed him, crying and pleading, and caught hold of his arm. He turned partly round, raised his other arm, struck at her with all his strength, and walked away again, leaving her lying on the ground. After a while she was found;

but she had been drinking that evening, and the effects of that, and of the heavy blow, and the cold frosty ground on which she lay, produced consequences from which she did not recover. For a while she was in a state of frenzy, and though she became calmer by degrees, she became insane.

The poor girl had no friends to ask after her, no one had been near that last interview, and Holbis naturally kept his own counsel, and said no word of the matter. Nevertheless, in her delirious ravings she had dropped some sentences in which his name was mentioned, and this became known to some of his companions and friends, who, though they dared not openly accuse him, yet ventured in his presence on mysterious hints, and looked on him with still more awe and suspicion than before. For some considerable while he lived in dread. But the poor girl, sinking by degrees into a state of calmer but still more complete insanity, lost all power to recollect—she was removed to a distant asylum, and he heard of her no more.



Then he fancied that all his care was gone. But in this he did himself injustice, he cared much more for the matter than he knew. Indeed, there are few things more terrible in life than the effect on any nature of even an approach to crime. We seem to lose then all power for self-restraint against the wickedness we have touched, as cowards who, once sensible that they have plunged themselves into danger, become too paralysed to resist it. From this time—that is, from the time when first his dread had passed, there came on Holbis a craving for intemperance that had never seized on him before. Yet this inherited evil, though for a while it overcame him utterly, did not gain entire possession of his life—it was to him a sort of intermittent fever that required always some outward excitement or agitation to produce it. Gradually, as years went on, these fits of madness and wretchedness became more and more rare, and he kept hoping against hope that they would not return again. But still they returned. And whilst they lasted—for a

day, a week, a month, as the case might be—he saw more often before him the gaslights, the river, the darkness, and the form of the wretched girl, lying on the ground, than he cared to remember afterwards when once the fit was gone.

There are very few more words that we need to hear of him now. He had in no small measure that strange instinctive leaning towards refinement that can possess the roughest mind when once the desire for knowledge has entered there. Also, by a not unnatural contradiction, this craving for refinement was accompanied by a bitter hatred of all whose social position was higher than his own—he had often said inwardly to himself that he would gain his dearest wish when he had knocked down a gentleman. Prudence denied him this luxury as yet. I have called him a heathen, but that does not prevent the fact that he sometimes said a prayer at night, nor that he had been both to church and chapel in his life. He

intended, if ever he grew richer, to go more regularly to church, an aristocratic sort of place that gave a good name and standing to a man ; but in his secret heart he preferred a chapel of the two, the loud, irregular rhythm of chapel singing filling him with that vague sensation that the distant sound of church bells can give to more cultured minds. With regard to varieties of doctrines he was large-minded—as some other people are—for he paid no attention to any of them.

Is more required ? He was twenty-eight, as has been said, and looked much older ; he had a square, large head, and square, enormous shoulders ; his hair was blue-black, and his jaw blue from imperfect shaving ; he had the strength of a giant in his body, and something of the same in his disposition too. What else besides strength he had these words perhaps have been enough to tell.

This then was the man who, lying down upon his narrow bed on that August night, with his face buried in the arms that

crushed in his pillow, saw before him the blue, terrified eyes and lovely face of the poor misguided child, and so seeing saw also —

Slowly the feeling grew, gathering strength slowly always as the days went on. Life *might* be beautiful—so Holbis thought.

## CHAPTER XII.

AND meanwhile—what shall we say of Meg?

This first—that she could have said nothing of herself. The days succeeded each other like bewildered dreams; all through that terrible time she had no power even to think at all.

The dark house, Mrs. Gay's crumpled cap, Sallie's loud laughter, the narrow street, the constant onions in the cooking, her bed in the passage, the strange sharp accent of the people, the men who came in with pipes in the evening, the wasting money in her purse, the baby next door who would scream and then be slapped, the sense of being always different from herself, the loneliness of having no one to whom to turn for help—these things were real enough, and yet were phantoms all. Her life seemed to have slipped out of her grasp, she had no power even to consider what it was best to do.

Perhaps the most real times were when

she could get upstairs in the daytime, free from fear of any sight or hearing from others, and lie on the bed in the passage and cry the slow scalding tears that seem to weep life itself away. These moments had their pain, but they were better than the rooms below where lodgers looked at her, and Sallie went about with pails, and Mrs. Gay whined dismally all the day, or in moments of mirth, made rude and clumsy jokes and slapped her maidservant on the back. Meg could not bear the whines, but the sort of gaiety the house could give had still less charm for her.

If she had been older, if she had owned more experience, more strength of character, or even more strength of health, she might have been able as time went on to accommodate herself to the altered ways, or, failing such power of accommodation, to attempt—even out of such scanty materials as she possessed—to shape for herself some definite course of life. But she had not these things. Her delicate childish health could not bear

the coarse food that was offered her; could bear still less the coarse jokes and manners of these strange people who were around her. Even Mrs. Gay's affection for Sallie was repellent to her, because of the jokes and slaps with which it expressed itself, and the sight of Sallie pulling off a shoe and chasing with it a rough man round the kitchen table was almost like an illness in its painfulness. They meant no harm, these people, but their ways were not such as hers, and she had always in her heart the dread that she might become like them, and lose the shrinking modesty in which she had been brought up, and to which she still clung.

How strange it seemed to her all this while that she had no tidings from her uncle's home! Sometimes she thought of this almost with pride, she had hidden herself so cleverly away from them; sometimes a cold, sick feeling came over her as she reflected that it might after all be true what they had said, and that they had taken no further thought for her. No, she could not

believe that they could be so hard as that, he liked to think of them as troubled about her, anxious and remorseful it might be, or at least very curious to know where she had gone. And still she could not help clinging to the hope that some day in altered and better circumstances she might yet meet with them again, and they might see how well she had been able to manage after all.

No, she had no wish to return to her uncle's house. The misery here, even at its greatest, was scarcely worse than that comfortable abode had been; she had no desire to exchange for that once more. Moreover she knew too truly that she could not return there and take up her old life again—the altered circumstances would certainly be too hard to bear. If she had been vexed before, what would the case be now, when the very sharpest punishment would, as she knew, be visited upon her shrinking head; when, in addition to the wrath of her uncle and the contempt even of the servants, she must bear the daily sneers of the young ladies,



or their laughter when they were in a good humour and ready to take up their pet joke again. No, she could not do it, and yet sometimes when her distress was greatest she used to fancy herself a ragged vagrant, sick with hunger and faintness, crawling back to her uncle's home, not that she might see him again, or see her cousins, but that she might press her lips on the old tree where she had carved her name, and see once more the gardens in which her childhood had played. There would be some little comfort, at least, in dying there.

Meanwhile, however, before this final catastrophe should end all for her, what was she to do?

Meg had left home, as we know, in some great belief as to the value of her powers, but that had dwindled much now that the moment for action came. Indeed, it seemed now, to her despairing heart, that there was no work that she could do. Sewing? There was none to be had, and she could not have done it if there had been. Teaching? No,

there were no "child'en as wanted their alphibits," so Mrs. Gay informed her, and she was not sure that she had education enough to instruct older years. She had sense enough, after a while had passed, to make her able to entreat Sallie to allow her to help in the housework, and now and then she was permitted to do some odd jobs with pails and clothes, but no one thought of paying her for these, and even to her own mind her labours did not seem deserving of reward. Meanwhile she paid away a little sum every week for board and lodging, and her store of money was rapidly wasting, in a few weeks it would be gone. In that desperate desire for confidence that seizes on misery sometimes, she felt a longing to tell all her troubles and entreat for help, but she knew not to whom to go. Sometimes in lonely wanderings through the poplar-bordered town she had ideas of seeking out some clergyman's wife and confiding all to her, but the same idea stopped her always—she knew too well the advice that

would be offered her at once. That advice, so much dreaded, came indeed from another quarter from which she had no expectation of receiving it.

"Sallie," she whispered one evening, with a great effort that brought the blood hotly to her face. They were laying the cloth for supper on the kitchen table as she spoke.

"Well?" asked Sallie, with impatient contempt, as she turned to get the cheese. She had her own private cause for scorn, for she had on a new blue ribbon, which had been a *present*, and Meg had not observed it.

"Do you think there is any work that I could find to do?"

Sallie turned round, put the cheese on the table, and stood with arms akimbo, and her rough, dark head on one side, with a manner of meditation and of scorn. She was a short, squat, rather ill-favoured creature, this Sallie

"What wark can ye do?" she said.

"I—I can do some work, indeed I can," hastily faltered Meg. "I—I could hem pocket-handkerchiefs if anyone had any for me to do."

She made this suggestion timidly, but was not prepared for the roar with which it was received.

"Hankerchers?" gasped Sallie, holding her sides, whilst the tears rolled down her cheeks, so much had her one gigantic snort taken away all her strength and breath. "Hankerchers! Ho! Ho!" and she stopped to gasp again.

Meg was silent and distressed.

"Where do ye come from?" asked Sallie, as soon as her gasps were done, standing now with her dark head still more on one side, and one eye closed to give greater force and emphasis to her remark. The colour rose slowly in Meg's downcast face, but she made no reply at all.

"Ye'd better go back where ye come fro'," her companion said. "We've got no wark for ye. A poor creature," her face

added, and Miss Sallie raised her chin with an insulting air.

But her words had roused in her companion another sort of strength. Meg made no answer, nor did her face even flush, she only turned gently away and busied herself with table arrangements, her head raised, and a grave, quiet silence on her face. The servant girl, whose education had not included self-restraint, found herself to have no more to say.

That night Meg went up early to her room (if we can call it so), and sat on her bed upon the floor, thinking with an earnestness that had no weakness of tears this time to break it down into self-pity or despair. Indeed, the ignorant, contemptuous words had roused in her all the strength of which she knew—not only that slight, short power that the sense of being scorned can give, but that other deeper feeling that, beneath all else, lay like hard steel in her soft, childish heart. She would not go back to her uncle's home.

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Only—her money would soon be gone—where was she to go? What was she to do? Breaking down again, she cried herself to sleep at last.

That deeper earnestness of feeling woke with her, however, the next morning, and remained through succeeding days. Indeed, the position was becoming desperate, necessity must soon have forced some resolve from her. In these days she wandered out much alone through the little town, by the winding of the river, along the poplar-bordered lanes, or in fields of wet stubble from which the harvest had gone, often not returning till the evening shadows had fallen on the streets. And as she wandered she tried hard to think. Her money would soon be gone—the same dreary words still repeated themselves—what could she do?

Whom could she ask for help? In the house with her were only Mrs. Gay, who looked on her with cold, suspicious eyes, and Sallie, to whom she did not wish to appeal again, and the lodgers who were all

men—the rough man on the first floor, and some young shopmen, and a snuffy old man who kept himself apart, and was looked on as mysterious—and, besides these, the men, relations or friends of Mrs. Gay, who came in with pipes to sup with Sallie in the evenings. She could not go for any help to these, and she was afraid *now* to take any sudden step that her own fancy might suggest, the feeling of fear had grown stronger since her freedom had been gained. Doubtless, it was well for Meg that, on that very first evening after her ill-advised escape, she had heard words that had served at once to inform her how easily branded is an unprotected name; a feeling of deeper womanhood had come with the conviction that it rested only with her now to guard herself.

Yet, something must be done, she could not wait here day after day whilst her money went slowly, coin by coin, like the last life-drops from a wound. It seemed to her at last that she must leave this place, and go to some other, where, perhaps, some

unknown work might yet be found, or, at least, where there might be more women to consult. She came to this conclusion on a damp autumn day, a day in the end of September, when the lanes were wet and heavy, and full of mists and dropping leaves, and when a thick fog rose slowly round her and terrified her by the darkness of it at last. Through that darkness, crying very much over even the scanty refuge that she must leave, she found her way back to the lights of the town again; she had turned into the narrow, dark street in which she lived, and was just passing the one gaslamp, that lent to it an insufficient light, when her foot slipped and she dropped her cotton umbrella on the ground. A man picked it up and gave it to her, and, as he did so, she recognised him.

“Is anything the matter?” asked Holbis.

For traces of tears were on the face that she raised to him. He had never spoken to her before, and she only just knew him by sight; but his tone was gentle now, and



instantly she seemed to hear in it the accent of a friend. Meg was in a state of mind at that moment in which the slightest friendship becomes a thing at which to grasp.

"I have been thinking how to find work," she said, raising her blue eyes with desperate hope to him—this great, rough man who seemed to have kind thoughts and looks for her. Holbis stood by her side and made no answer for a while. His heart was beating fast, he had never hoped to have such an opportunity as this.

"What work can you do?" he said.

She made no reply, and, looking down on her face, he saw there plainly written the sad, sad story that every day repeats—the story in which utter helplessness finds itself face to face with need. Yet, there was something else in her expression, too—poor Meg could no more help breathing and living than she could the childish, appealing look that told, too truly, how little she had even yet learnt of the reserve of life.

"I must leave here—soon—to-morrow,"

she faltered, "if I can find no work to do."

Holbis, strong and rough as he was, felt at that moment a curious thrill, as if some danger that he might yet avert, had come closer to him than he knew. She still looked up at him, wondering at his silence, as if she waited for his words. In that moment, if he had told her to go back to her friends, she might have believed him, and have gone. But he had no thought of that.

"Stay here two days, only two days," he said, "and I will find some work for you."

And with that he put his hand up to his rough cap for an instant, and went on into the darkness, leaving her to return to Mrs. Gay's alone.

Holbis had undertaken a difficult task. But he kept his word. Before the two days were over he had found some work for her.

## CHAPTER XIII.

IN a large, ill-lighted, barely-furnished room some young men were lounging together on the afternoon of that second day. A small fire burned in the grate, for the day as it drew on towards evening was turning damp and cold, the long window in the roof had its shutters drawn, and the one gas-burner had been lit. On a shelf high up under the ceiling a number of plaster casts of mythological gods and heroines had a somewhat shadowed, contemptuous, and deserted look; in front of the fire, where the rug might have been if there had been one, a great, black mastiff lay, and a sort of movable platform with a chair upon it had been dragged out into the very centre of the room. Of the young men, two were lounging in easy chairs and smoking as they lay, another, and much younger one, was arranging an easel with the utmost care, one was reading a newspaper in a corner, and two others were

lying upon the uncarpeted floor building a card house with an old pack that lay scattered by their side. There were benches, and paint boxes, and brushes in much confusion all around, and a general artistic and poverty-stricken appearance about the place.

"I say," said one of the two who had been smoking, throwing his pipe down upon the floor, clasping his arms over his head, and speaking in an injured and openly-aggravated tone, "it's turning out the same sort of beastly evening that it was last night. What Hobbs means by it, it passes my wits to know."

"What I mean by it?" asked Hobbs, smoking calmly all the time, and letting himself drop still further into a chair whose soft cushions were only just able to hold the broad shoulders it contained. "I wish my meaning had some in-flu-ence on the weath-er."

He spoke in this slow, lazy way, that still was not a drawl, as if he would not take the trouble to join his words.

"You bring us down here," went on the other, still on thoughts of injuries intent; "you tempt us with stories of scenery and rural delights, and you get us all landed in this abominable hole, where there's not so much as a cat that's worth the looking at, and where the vilest poplars stand about the streets like lanky girls that ain't got no crinolines to boast on. It's all very fine for you to bring out your river views" (much sarcasm here), "when you've got a magazine hard enough up to descend as low as your river and yourself, but as for us and for this town you've romanced about" —

"The town," said Hobbs, taking his pipe out of his mouth, leaning back, and speaking with more slowness than before, "is a good town—in its way" —

"It ain't," burst in the young man who had been arranging his easel, with much force and vigour in his tone. "There's not a word of truth that can be said in favour of the town. And as for the river" —

"The river," said Hobbs, leaning back still

more, and speaking slowly with one eye shut to give more importance to his words, "the river also is a good river, and has supplied me with a professional income for a year and more."

"I'll shy my easel at your head," said Langley, "if you tell me that again."

"The river," repeated Hobbs, with lengthened drawling now, "is also a good river, and has supplied me" —

Here the man who had been reading a newspaper flung it down upon the ground, and with two strides was across the room, one hand on Langley's shoulder and the other on his easel. He was the oldest of them all, and for this reason, perhaps, the self-constituted guardian of the rest.

"Shut up that," he said. "I never in all my life saw such fools for a row. Why can't you be quiet and get the place in order for this girl that's coming here to-night?"

"She's a horrid nuisance, this girl," said one of the two who were building a card house on the floor. "I wanted the big

fellow himself, and I believe that he'd have come. I intended to do him as Hercules for next year's 'Cademy."

"Go to—wherever you like with your *Herculeeses* and bosh," his companion answered. "Who cares for that sort of rubbish now? But a pretty girl—that's a fetching thing, in whatever age of the world you live."

"I like a man's legs and arms a deal the best," muttered the other as he added another card with caution to the pyramid.

"Well, at any rate, you've got the other, and you'll have to pay for her, and you'd better make the best of her," said Follett, who represented the wisdom of them all. "And it's about the time for her to be turning up, so I advise you to get your easels out." He relaxed his grasp on Langley's shoulder, as conscious that the moment of danger now was past. "As for me, I just want to finish this leader here. Hallo, there," for a gentle tap at the door arrested him as he was about to cross the room.

"There she is, I declare," said Newlands, with a sigh for Hercules as he spoke.

"Come in, will you?" called Danvers, without thinking it necessary to alter his position, or the arms that ruffled up the dark curls on his head. The others, without changing their places, looked eagerly towards the door.

In another instant it had closed again, and Meg stood before them all, a slight, black figure, with her face timid, flushed, and down-cast beneath the great black hat she wore. Follett stood still in the middle of the room, the smoker took his pipe out of his mouth, the handsome lad by the easel bent forward with a curiosity he did not in the least disguise. Newlands had overturned his pyramid of cards and lay flat out on the floor with his elbows on it and his head between his hands, Crake raised himself to a sitting position as in some vague idea that there was more respect in that. Still Meg stood by the threshold of the door, struck with terror as it seemed, and unable to advance.

"Is it all right? Was I—to come here?"



she faltered in the very faintest whisper the room had ever heard.

"Quite right—we were expecting you," said Follett, who did the honours on these occasions for the rest. "If you'll just sit down and make yourself comfortable we'll get the room ready in a trice."

"But I thought—there would be some ladies here," she faltered, crimsoning more and more, and her lips moving as if she were going to cry. Newlands, hearing these words, rose with an involuntary movement to his feet.

"We'd send up for our sisters, and mothers, and our wives too if we had 'em," Crake explained, sitting still upon the floor. "But you see there ain't no room for 'em just here. It's very hard, no doubt, on us to be debarred from all female" —

"Shut up that," said Follett, who assumed authority over conversation too. "Miss—Harman, I believe your name is, you are engaged to us for two hours, I think? Would you mind taking your place; these

fellows may see some necessity for getting the room in order then ? ”

“ But are you sure—there will be—no ladies ? ” faltered Meg again, too distressed and confused to be able to escape from the idea with which she came.

“ We won’t hurt you,” said Hobbs, from the corner by the fireplace where he sat.

“ It’s all right. Take off your hat,” commanded Follett, quickly and sternly, for he thought she was giving unnecessary trouble.

His impatient tone almost brought the tears to her eyes, and she obeyed at once.

Her hat was large and black, and had kept her face all but concealed. It was like a sudden vision when the gaslight shone now on the fair, childish features and bright, roughened hair. The young men stood still as if a thrill had gone through them all. Yet this was not the same face as that which she had owned only three short months before. Beneath the blue, lovely eyes were dark shadows now, and as she raised her head with an involuntary movement towards

the light, the weary quiver of her lips had not in it so much of tears as of that tired feeling that is the beginning of despair. Newlands stood still, looking towards her, and drawing in his lips with a shiver, as if something had fascinated him, and he did not quite know where he was. Langley, at the very sight of the beauty of her, had grasped his easel with his hand, and flushed all over his face with boyish excitement and delight.

Meanwhile Crake and Hobbs, who in general represented the working members of the party, had pulled out the platform and arranged the chair, and Mr. Follett had come close to her to conduct her to her throne.

“Oh, are you sure—it’s right for me to be here?” whispered Meg, in one last desperate appeal, beneath her breath; but the words could not be heard even by the one who was closest to her.

Still he spoke, feeling in some strange way compelled to answer as he met the appealing beauty of her eyes.

“It will be very dark when you go back,

“won’t it ?” he said, more kindly than before.

“How will you manage about that ?”

“Sallie came with me,” whispered Meg, “but she said she could not come back for me again.”

“Oh, any one of us will take you back,” said Langley quickly, before anyone else could speak.

“Thank you ; I would rather be alone,” and a slower and more womanly colour flushed her face.

Something in her tone silenced all the young men for an instant. Newlands, with a heavy sigh, got easel and canvas out. Her face, as it had been a minute or two before, was still before his eyes. The lad had more of the dramatic instinct of his art within him than all the rest together ; hitherto that had been wasted only on corpses and murderers that his own imagination had supplied, now for one moment he had seen before him a glimpse into a deeper tragedy than his skill could paint. But it was only, perhaps, as a painter that he felt it after all.

"Good gracious! She's a lady," whispered Crake aside to him.

"How do you know?"

"Look at her neck then. Do you think there's any other girl of any sort that would come to be painted without a lot of cheap finery all dangling round her collar bones? Just look at her, I say."

Indeed, between Meg's fair, soft neck and the black border of her dress was only one small bit of white frilling, that fitted closely there. It was the very cheapest frilling that money could purchase, but the young man's thoughts were of another kind of cheapness then.

She took her place, the young men got out their easels and arranged themselves round her; there was complete silence, and the two hours' work began.

And now imagine the scene—the large, ill-lighted room, the great black dog stretched before the fire, the young men in a semi-circle with their easels and their paint-brushes, the plaster heroes and heroines

above upon the shelf, and beneath the cold grandeur of these abstractions in the shadows, Meg in her warm young beauty in the light below, her fair hair rough enough to be rippled, her little hands clasped nervously on her knee, her long bright eye-lashes drooping, her black dress giving only more effect to the soft, changing colours in her face. To the young men, lost all of them now in the artist-sense, it did indeed seem as if they had found some ideal that they had vainly sought till now, and Meg seemed placed on a throne to receive the homage of them all.

It seemed so to them, but to the poor child, struggling under a sense of agony all the greater because of the confusion that produced it, seeing all the figures in front of her as blurred outlines that yet, as she dimly felt, were looking always straight at her, that hour was such a time of suffering as all her life had never known till now. She could not stay to reason on the matter; the feeling of being on a platform with all those men's eyes

below, the fatal prominence in which she found herself placed, were all too much for her ; she was doing wrong ; she *knew* she was doing wrong, and oh ! if she had only courage to speak, to move, to break this band of terror that seemed to rest across her breast, and to resolve that she would not be so wicked any more. Every moment was one of long torture ; distant footsteps, a dog's barking, came to her like sounds in a delirious dream ; it seemed to her that she was being disgraced for ever, and still she had no power to move. And then, all at once, a man's voice broke the silence of the group, like a sharp disturbing of a dream.

"She ought to turn a little more to the right," said Crake.

"Move your head to the right a little, please," assisted Hobbs.

Meg made the movement as required, whilst hot waves of blushes burnt her cheeks.

The spell was broken, and she knew that her lips were beginning to tremble now.

"Her hands don't look easy," went on

Crake. "Fold them a little, if you please. But it's her hair I mind. It falls too low on this side of her face—quite spoils the outline of her cheek. Push it back please, can't you? Look here in this way."

And rising, he made a movement with his hand.

It was an involuntary action, meant only to show her what to do, but to Meg it seemed that he was about to put back her hair with his hand himself.

She started up at once.

"Oh, let me go; I can't bear it," she cried, and trembling too much even to stand, fell down into her chair again, covered her face with her hands, and broke into convulsive sobbing.

There was silence, and the young men looked at each other. Meg kept her face hidden, and the sound of her piteous crying went through the room.

"What on *earth*?" muttered Hobbs, forming his lips into whistles, though he made no sound with them.



"It's your fault, you idiot. What did you mean by frightening her?" burst out Newlands, turning fiercely on to Crake.

The lad had been sitting almost motionless all the while, making only a few strokes on his canvas with which to satisfy the rest, lost in a sort of ethereal vision and painter's dream. And now the beautiful ideal was gone, and only a crying girl was left.

"Come, come, there's no need for this," murmured Follett, in a soothing voice.

Meg was far past all power of hearing what they said.

But now Langley sprang upon the platform and bent down to her.

"Don't, please, cry like that," he whispered, in boyish, caressing tones. "You don't know how it hurts us to hear you. It's all our fault; we're rough in our manners, though we didn't mean to frighten you, indeed. I can quite understand it—a lot of people staring, and you not used to it at all. Come, please, put down your hands; we want to tell you that we won't frighten you so much again."

His voice was very low and soft, with the accent of refinement in it, too, that seemed to speak to her like a memory of former days. Trembling a little, she removed her hands. He had bent down to her, and as her glance met his handsome boy eyes, looking with an imploring expression that still was a smile at hers, a trembling quiver of a smile stole over her face as well. The rest, standing now in a group on one side, waited in astonishment to see what would happen next.

"Look here," said Langley, getting down off the platform, and speaking aside to them, "just leave me with her, will you, for a while? It's the number of us that frightens her just now, she'll be all right as soon as she is alone with me."

The others, hearing him, shrugged their shoulders, mentally and literally, at his words, but the position was unpleasant, and there seemed some reason for doing what he said.

"That fellow thinks so much of himself," muttered Danvers, who stood next in good

looks amongst them all. But he also retreated with the rest.

And now, the others having retired to the shadows at the further end, they were left alone together, Meg more composed, but still trembling with recent tears on her uneasy throne, Langley on one knee on the edge of the platform by her side, mixing up entreaties, nonsense, and flattery in an endless confusion of softly-spoken words. Meg was scarcely aware of anything he said, but the handsome boyish face, and the pleasant manner had an attraction that she could not resist. More than that, the look of his eyes, as they rested always on her, made her heart thrill with the sense of an admiration she had never imagined before. Gradually she began to feel some shy confidence ; he was not many years older than herself, and she was more at her ease with him.

“ I wish my sister were here,” he said.

“ Have you many sisters ? ” she asked him, with a timid, interested glance.

“ No, only this one ; about your age, only

not near" — so pretty as you are, he would have said, but Meg's changing face warned him that he could venture on no direct compliment to her.

"What was it that frightened you all at once?" he asked, to change the subject then.

"I—I don't know. I don't think I was frightened altogether. It is only that I can't be sure if it is right. Do you think it is right?" she asked, with a timid, appealing glance at him.

"Right!—what?" —

"Oh, I can't feel that it is right," said Meg, almost again in tears. "If it wasn't for that I shouldn't mind at all. It seems as if it were so wrong in me to sit up here and be drawn like this. If you could tell me it was not wrong, I should not care so much."

"You—are not used to anything of this sort?" he asked after a pause, during which wonder and pity so filled his mind, even to his own astonishment, that he found it impossible to speak.

"Oh! no—no."

"Is your home near here?"

"I have no home—now" —

"No home—no friends?"

"No. If you could tell me that it is not wrong" —

Langley hesitated for a while. Young and carelessly self-indulgent as he was, the sense of her complete trust pierced even to his heart, and rendered it difficult for him to answer.

"There is no harm in it," he said at last; "but if you don't like it, and you're not used to it—perhaps it would be best—I say" — more quickly, for he saw that the others were moving now, "you'll come again one day, and just tell us what you mean to do?"

She made no reply.

"You won't mind, will you, if we are not all of us together here? It's the number of us that frightens you, I know it is. Come when there are only one or two of us, and there won't be any reason to mind at all."

"Will you be here?" she asked, with a timid glance at him.

"I? Oh, yes, yes," answered the boy, blushing all over from what was after all not so great a compliment as he imagined it to be. "Come to-morrow at three o'clock, I say. It shall be all right for you, and we can pay you then."

"Oh, I havn't earned it, the money," in a little cry under her breath, as the old distress suggested itself again.

"You have very little money?" he whispered, coming closer to her now. But there was no time for more, for all the rest advanced.

"Miss Harman seems more composed," said Follett. "But it is getting late. Perhaps," addressing Meg, "we had better break up the sitting now."

"It ain't much use, indeed," whispered Crake, audibly, "with her eyes as red as that."

But Newlands interrupted him at once—

"Stop that, you idiot. You will send us

word," he went on in a much softer tone, "or come yourself, will you not?"

"Oh, yes, I said I would come," whispered Meg, with an openness that Langley had not desired. "To-morrow, at three."

"At three! Who told you that? We shall all be away, and on the river at three."

"I shall be here," replied Langley, before they could speak.

"O—oh!" from all the rest.

"Come, it doesn't signify," interrupted Follett, anxious to get Meg away before the dispute began. "We'll send you word, Miss Harman, or, if not, you will come as you said. Where is your shawl? Oh, there, on that chair, and we will arrange everything to-morrow."

"But are you sure you would like no one to be with you?" asked Newlands, anxiously, for the evening darkness was already in the further corners of the room.

"Oh, no, please, I would rather be alone," Meg answered, with an earnestness that made the pathetic tones linger on the ears of those

who heard; and wrapping round her the black shawl that Sallie had lent, she went downstairs, and out into the night. The young men stood still, without looking at each other, as if some fair vision had departed from among them.

"I say," put in Crake, breaking the silence with his most unmelodious voice, "she doesn't look like gaining her own living, that young woman there."

"Poor lamb—poor lost child," murmured Follett, under his breath, as he sat down by the fire. Then they all gathered round the flames and talked of her.

Meg caught no echo of those distant words as she stole timidly in the darkness through the streets. She felt miserable and yet excited, sick at heart, not daring to think of the evening that had passed, and yet thrilled by a vague sense of unknown possibilities that had never visited her before. When she reached the house at last, she could not go and have supper with the rest, could not face the untruthful Sallie (who had given



the message of Holbis, and with whom the notion of ladies had originated first). Instead, she stole upstairs to her miserable bed, and there lay down to rest, seeing the faces round her, hearing young voices in her ears until she slept. She had gained her first glimpse into the artist world, perhaps it was natural she should find some excitement there.

\* \* \* \* \*

But meanwhile the artists themselves had come to some conclusions on the subject (on which, indeed, the greater part of their night was spent).

When Meg arrived the next day she found only two of them at home: Langley caressing Hobbs's mastiff on the floor, and Follett, neat, sandy-haired and spectacled, reading a newspaper in a corner by the fire. Both rose at once to receive her, with a courtesy that had been very much wanting to their manners the day before.

Indeed, there had been much discussion

through the night, as I have said : their lovely model was all too interesting a subject to be carelessly dismissed, and sitting round the fire, and smoking as they talked, they had all found some words to say. On the whole, taking their tone from the oldest and most thoughtful of the party, they all found themselves agreed as well. Evidently this young beauty, with the shy face and trembling lips—this frightened, lovely child—had known once some different days : some runaway school girl, it might be, whom pride or temper was still keeping from her friends. That such a position was to be pitied they could not but all agree, that it was perilous they silently owned as well ; she had come to them and suffered from coming, they must do the best they could for her. Perhaps under the circumstances—though this was admitted with reluctance—it might be as well that she should not be painted by them again. Old Follett thought so, and after all he generally knew.

“We won’t have anything to do with her,”

he said, "we'll get up a little money, and send her back to her friends."

Then they had all subscribed: Newlands, who was the poorest of them all, giving as usual the largest share. From out of their scanty funds they got together two pounds, and it was agreed that Follett should stay at home on the following day, and present it to her with some suitable advice.

So early in the morning the four had started on their travels down the river, a little excited at the thought of their day's sport, a little inclined to grumble over the new sensation of a missed romance, and not a little enchanted with their own great virtue and kindness which the occasion so openly displayed. Certainly the mentor of the party had every reason to be glad.

And now Follett and Langley, left alone together, politely greeted Meg, the latter with his boyish smiling grace in looks and words, the former with the gravity of an unpleasant commission, and the constraint of an awkward man. And Meg, even fairer in the sun-

light than she had seemed in the evening, stood with drooping head and frightened, childish looks to listen in silence to his words. I wonder if she was most glad or sorry to be told that they would not require her to return to the place again.

Follett told her this, and then coughed, and then looked towards Langley and coughed once more. He was beginning to feel that impossibility of speaking that seizes on a nervous man when a third and less interested person is listening to his words. But it was not in his nature to endure that constraint for long.

"Langley, would you mind going downstairs?" he said.

His companion looked towards him with an expression that betokened anything rather than compliance, and then a sudden idea crossing his mind, turned and obeyed at once. If Mr. Follett had been at ease, he would have suspected such strange docility, but he was not.

And now they were left alone together,

the sandy-haired, precise man, and Meg, who stood close to him in her black dress, looking downwards with changing expressions in her face—so glad was she to be relieved from Langley's admiring glance, and yet so frightened at finding herself alone with this other and older man. He dared not glance at her, and yet he knew that her face was pale and her eyelids heavy, and there was a rush of aching pity at his heart. Perhaps he was not particularly tender in disposition, this man of twenty-seven, but he had known the experience of a hard story for himself.

"I wish to tell you"—he said, and then he coughed again, and turned his eyes away. "We have the money here for you."

And he held out the two golden pounds. Meg's eyes glistened, and her breath came so fast that she could not speak, but she took them from his hand at once. Poor, ignorant creature, she really imagined they were the wages due, and already her relief was tinged with the regretful thought of the golden Eldorados she had lost. Mr. Follett, not un-

derstanding, had a moment of surprise and annoyance that held his breath as well.

“Oh! do you think I ought to take them?” she whispered breathlessly, raising her blue eyes to him. “I did not sit quite all the time.”

He started as he turned to her. And as his eyes fell now full upon her face, the lovely childish, sorrowful features woke in him suddenly such a storm of feeling as in all his life had never even been close to him before. He turned very pale, even she was aware of that, and his words came harshly and quickly now.

“Keep it, keep it!” he said, “who wants to take it from you? But there was something else I had to say. I wanted to ask you more about yourself.”

There was silence. The colour faded slowly from Meg’s downcast face, and her head drooped lower as she stood. But she had no word to say.

“You have run away from home?”

Still silence, but hot waves of blushes.

burnt her cheeks. Then she raised her eyes, blue, pleading, miserable, as a child asks pardon for a fault. For one instant he looked down on them, and then he spoke.

“Then I have only one thing more to say to you,” he said, very fast and harshly now. “Go back to your friends. Do you hear what I say to you? Go back to your friends. It isn’t safe, it isn’t right for you to be about here in the world alone. Go back to them, I tell you. Do you want to know the meaning of what I have been saying to you. . . . If the Almighty God had meant you to wander about alone, He wouldn’t have given you those eyes with which to make fools of men. There—go!” and putting out his hand as if he would push her from him he turned away. Dazed and confounded, still more by his manner than his words, she found her way trembling to the door.

Something of the echo of those words was in her ears, indeed, as she descended the stairs in a slow, dejected way—something,

too, of a vague terror she had not felt before. But, ah ! poor Meg, even in those instants another eloquence was pleading too, the despair of the last few weeks was farther off again, for the two sovereigns were in her hand, and no warning short of the starvation she had feared could drive her back again to her uncle's home.

Yet, if lessons could have taught, she had yet one more to learn before that day was done.

The slanting rays of afternoon sunlight were on the houses as she came timidly out into the street. There was a little patch of trodden grass and a railing with an iron gate before the house from which she came. There Langley stood, leaning on the gate and smoking a cigar, with his face towards the street ; but at the sound of her footsteps he turned and came to her. He looked very handsome as he stood there by the gate, with the glow of the sunlight on his face, handsomer still when, with a smile of welcome, he raised his rough cap from his head.



"Which way are you going?" he asked her, with a bright carelessness of tone.

And she told him simply, without any thought of fear.

"What a good thing!" he said. "I am going the same way myself."

He spoke as if he had made some sudden discovery, and Meg had no idea of doubting, or suspecting, or finding some hidden meaning in his words; she was rather glad of a companionship that relieved her from sad thoughts for a while, and let him walk by her side as she went down the street.

What *was* his meaning? Probably he did not know. He talked incessantly to her as they went, in a rapid and agitated tone. First he pitied her in low, soft whispers for her friendless state; then he wished to know if it were really true that she was so much in want; and then, without waiting for an answer, if she must indeed never, never meet with him again—she must know by this time how much he cared for her.

Meg had listened in wonder and in silence,

soothed almost to tears, ready to rest in the sense of his pity, as if that were some assistance to her need; but with the last words even her inexperienced ears knew a change of tone. With one of those Heaven-sent instincts that come to children and to the ignorant she shrank away at once. He came close to her, and laid his hand upon her arm. Then she pushed him from her with all the strength she had, and ran.

A man was coming round the corner of the street, and in her hurry she ran against him as she went. Then she recognised him—her fellow-lodger whom she had not seen since they had parted in the fog.

“Oh, Mr. Holbis, save me; don’t let him come near to me,” she cried.

Langley came up in that instant, and in another instant was lying on the ground.

He rose directly, panting and furious, though stunned by the heavy blow and heavy fall he had received. Meg was leaning against the wall, crying from fright and fear; Holbis stood between her and him,

towering in his strength, and quite ready to assert that strength again.

"Now then, young gentleman," he said, "get back where you came from, if you please."

"You big bully!" cried the lad, trembling through all his young figure. "What do you mean by this? What right have you to prevent my walking with any young woman, I should like to know?"

Even at that moment she observed that he did not call her a lady.

"Stand out of the way, if you please, and let me go on to her."

"You may come on, if you like, of course, young gentleman," said Holbis, still hindering the way, "but I rather think it will be the worse for you."

It would so very evidently be the worse for him that Langley paused. He was not a coward, but he had been already hurt and bruised, and the issue of such a conflict was already much too plain. Yet his boy's spirit rebelled against being thought afraid, and he

waited still an instant, just out of reach of Holbis's giant arms, longing and yet not daring to advance, looking down the quiet streets that he might see if anyone was coming who would give the assistance he required. Then it occurred to him all at once that Meg herself could settle the question best.

"It is for the lady to speak, I should think," he said sullenly. "If she likes such as you, I will not oppose her choice."

The scornful words roused the anger of Holbis now, but Meg seized the arm he had just begun to raise.

"I admire your taste, Miss Harman," said the boy, raising his chin, and looking at her from under half-closed eyes. "Something rather in the coalheaver line, I think. I have no wish to enter into rivalry with that," and raising his cap gracefully, he retreated backwards, lest his adversary should attack him from behind.

Holbis had, indeed, trembled in his turn, and probably it was only Meg's soft touch

that saved Langley from broken bones. To that, however, he yielded.

“Let us go back,” he said.

They turned the corner, and Langley saw no more of them.

As for him he slunk back in a desperate rage, feeling more like a beaten cur than he would have cared to own. Nor were his feelings much likely to be soothed by the reception he met with—his companions were setting out in a body to look for him, having been informed by Follett that he had been last seen walking away with Meg. It may be easily imagined in what light they viewed his return, covered with mud and with a large bruise upon his face, and their indignation against him, which was excessive, found a vent in the very frankest of contempt.

Langley gained slight comfort for his aching head, and was obliged at last to retire to the coldness of his own small room upstairs that he might escape from the “Thrashed?—a-ah!” that met him on all sides from his friends. So hot, indeed, was the dispute,

that by the next morning even it had not cooled, and he returned to London in a much worse temper than when he left. The small society of artists found itself reduced by one.

And Meg and Holbis had gone back side by side. She had dropped her touch on his arm as soon as the corner was passed, and they had said not one single word, some new reserve in her imposing restraint on him. Yet when they stood by Mrs. Gay's door he spoke at last—in the tone of the victorious now.

“He meant bad by you,” he said.

Meg gave a little shivering sigh. At that moment she felt herself ready enough to believe the worst. But indeed Holbis knew nothing of Langley, and had only spoken by conjecture to exalt his own success.

“If you would only let me take more care for you,” he said.

Meg for one instant turned her sorrowful yes on him and then looked away. Doubtless, alas! she saw already in his glance the look she had learnt to dread.

"Thank you," she said in a low, sweet voice, "but I had much rather be alone."

She passed him, opened the door, and went down the dark passage and upstairs to her room. There she laid down her weary, throbbing head in the darkness, wondering if the repose of a coffin would be the only rest for her.

And Holbis had gone to his room and sat down by the window, as if to look at the clothes-lines in the yard. The evening sunlight was on them, on the lame blackbird hopping awkwardly beneath, and on the rows of poplar trees beyond; the evening air, even in that confined spot, came with sweet freshness to his face, but he scarcely felt or saw these things at all. His eyes were dull and fixed, his heart was beating with slow, heavy throbs, and a curious smile rose upon his lips.

"Ah, my lady," he said, "your pride will have to be a little lowered yet, I think."

Then, with a sudden, passionate gesture, strange in him, he spread out his strong arms.

and then pressed them against his breast, harder and harder, as if he were crushing something to his heart. And as he did so two slow, hot tears fell from his eyes on to the window-sill beneath. He rose then and set to his work again.

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So the days passed. He said no more to Meg, who went with pale and weary looks about the house.

The first days of the autumn grew hot and fine, the young artists had invitations to Wales and to Devonshire, and scattered apart once more before they had ever seen their cause of dispute again. Meg knew no more of them till she heard from Sallie they were gone.

So ended her glimpse into the artist world. It left her with two sovereigns more, and with some painful lessons with newly waking impulses and with some still uncomprehended dreams as well. On the whole it was but an uncertain profit that she gained.

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## CHAPTER XIV.

SLOWLY the winter came. The dead, dropping leaves fell off the trees, the winds, higher now, took a moaning and tempestuous sound, and the skies were grey and leaden with a stormy, silent look. Then all at once the weather cleared, sharp frosts came on all over the land, there were lights and sparkles on the bareness of the fields, and on the roofs of houses in the towns, and clinging to the quaint, massive carving of old cathedral towers. That time passed as well, and changed to the fog-shrouded highways and cold, damp, darkness of November days.

What did Mr. Harman and his family care for that? If their dark garden was still more dark and dismal now, fires blazed brightly and made a red glow on the windows from within the house. The master had lately chosen and fitted up a new study

for himself, warm and snug, with a crimson curtain hanging from a brass rod to shut out all coldness from the door, and with his books all round him in great carved book-cases that an antiquary might have loved. As for the young ladies, they were in the highest of spirits too, the time for winter balls was fast approaching, and they were to have again a large party in the house. Already the consultations on their dresses had begun, and the two younger ones had many little words and hints together about the partners who were to be, whilst the eldest kept apart and indulged in dreams alone. The house was being prepared already for the guests; it was a pleasant, warm time of waiting and expectation, those early winter days.

And far away, also, another smaller country house was in a state of preparation too. Its master, indeed, had not come back to it again, but he might determine at any time on doing so, and his two old servants kept it warm and bright for him. One room especially was

kept always ready—for he had wished for that—a room with a little white-curtained bed, and warm red winter curtains to the windows, and everything in it quite complete, down to the bright new books in the little book-case and the Dresden china figures who fell into graceful attitudes on the mantelpiece and on brackets against the walls. At nights, sometimes, when the fire was lighted and the wavering gleams fell on these little figures and on all the brightness around, the room had quite an inhabited look, though in real truth it was only waiting too.

Thinking of these things, of bright welcomes, pleasant rooms, and luxurious ways, of forgiveness readily won, and a pleasant life so easily secured, I scarcely know whether to laugh or cry when I think again of Meg, sitting on her little bed on the floor in the cold passage in these dark November evenings, with a tallow candle by her side, her eyes red and sore with work and tears, her hands trembling with cold, and two poor little fingers painfully rough with needle-

pricks. Day after day, rising early in the morning, sitting up late at night, toiling as hard as men can toil for bread, and yet earning little—so little!—that it seemed too evident that the toil must be all in vain at last. What was the use of this? She knew nothing of the warm home so close to her even then, but it did seem to her sometimes as if it were all too hard and painful to be borne. They were very dark, those winter days; day succeeded day, and there came no hope of help at all.

And yet, after all, it was a comfort to get even the worst-paid work to do. For some more weeks had passed, and the little store of money, renewed to greatness for a while, was wasting fast again. It was not only the board and lodging, though these seemed to cost so much, there were many other things that had to be bought. The weather grew frosty, the cold made her cough, and she was compelled to buy a winter dress: she bought an old one of Sallie's, but that had to be paid for, and then to be altered by the workwoman.

next door, and the alterations to be paid for too. Then came on heavy rains, and an umbrella must be had ; it was only a cotton umbrella, but even that seemed dear. The two pounds that the young artists had given had not lasted long.

There had been a time—now some weeks ago—when Meg had grown sick and desperate with trouble and want of hope, when even her eyes had taken a haggard, hungry look as if they were worn with straining for the help that would not come. Well, indeed, was it for her in those days that such hard silence could be broken now and again by the fits of convulsive weeping that had still power to make her a child once more. Yet even these terrified her, they came on her so suddenly, and she had no physical strength with which to resist them. One day such an attack overtook her in the kitchen, and in great terror and shame she hastened away. In the passage outside she met Holbis, to whom she never spoke, and with a sudden impulse stood still at once. He stood still also, and

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raising her swollen eyes she saw that his steady glance was fixed on her.

“Oh! if you could find me some work,” she said.

No more; he did not even answer her, but passed her and went on into the kitchen without a word. Yet she was certain that her appeal was heard. And when, some days afterwards, Mrs. Gay brought some work that had been sent for her, she knew before she was told through whom that work had come, and could feel even beneath that first rapture of relief the vague dread that told her he would know well how to use all the power that he gained. Still the work was there, there was no resisting that.

And what work was it that at last had come? Well, that is of small consequence; Holbis had many acquaintances, and amongst them some who would put up with very bad sewing if they could have that sewing cheap. I think the first lot consisted entirely of worn out and disabled socks. Meg could not darn; but Sallie gave some kind instruc-

tion, and she did the best she could. In course of time garments of many orders were submitted to her hands. One "mother of a family," for so Mrs. Gay described her, did indeed complain to that matron in indignant terms that she had never seen such work before; but, with that one exception, the worked-for submitted with a patience that was indeed to be admired. Certainly they paid her scarcely anything, and she toiled day and night for them. Holbis received the money always himself, and gave it to Mrs. Gay for her.

If only she had been able always to work where it was warm: it was so cold in her passage-room upstairs. Yet she dared not sit in the kitchen at nights, there were always so many men there, and she was afraid of them; she preferred to work trembling and shivering, upstairs, with aching pains in her back and limbs, whilst the tallow candle guttered disconsolately by her side. Even that did not save her altogether. One of the young shopmen who lodged in

the house came to her in the kitchen one day and offered her an artificial rose, the best that the shop could furnish. She declined it, indeed, but that refusal hurt his feelings much, and from that time he lost no opportunity of showing his disdain for her. He even condescended—yes, actually did condescend—to take his supper in the kitchen, though he was a smart young man, the very smartest in the shop, because it was relief to his wounded feelings to pour out in her presence some of the scorn with which his heart was filled.

“Here comes Miss as thinks herself too good for us,” he would say to Sallie as Meg’s sad face came in ; or he would ask with cutting sarcasm “if the *lady* would take some beer ;” or he would give vent to mysterious sentences, extracted from penny novels, about “the board being graced.”

Meg sometimes felt scalding tears rise unbidden to her eyes at these reproofs, but she hid these signs of emotion carefully from him, and confined herself more to her passage-

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room than she had done before. If it had only been warmer—it seemed cruel that it should be so cold. Often she could have longed to die, only—only that such a death would be thought her final failure in her uncle's home.

Holbis meanwhile kept her supplied with work. One little fact deserves mention—he gave her no employment for himself, and once when Mrs. Gay—through whose hands everything passed—seemed inclined to add to the list some boots that had no buttons, of his own, he took them from her with violent anger, and declared that she should do no work for him. Some curious instinct as to her feeling guided him right in this.

Meanwhile he let the dark, cold days pass on and on, and watched day by day Meg's face grow more careworn, and her eyes more sad, and saw that her little payment—ah! so little—was always secured to her. Sometimes, though not often, he added to this some sixpences or shillings of his own—not often—he wanted her to be poor, and

wretched, and overworked that she might turn more readily to him. Yet even his heart smote him sometimes as he saw her face, only his strong purpose, the purpose that grew like hunger in his heart, was stronger than his pity even then; and still he would not speak to her, or come near her, he allowed himself no word, no touch, waiting for the day when he might claim such privileges as a right. Only once his passionate feeling, breaking bounds, escaped the limits he had set.

Meg was coming into the house from out of doors when he turned the handle of the door. So they stood together on the threshold. There was a thick, damp fog without, but light enough was left for him to see how pale and tired she looked, how sad and worn were the eyes that she raised almost unconsciously to him. He spoke at once.

“You look ill and tired,” he said.

She gave no answer, but her lips trembled, and her blue eyes filled slowly with tears.

"If you would only let me care for you, you need never do a stroke of work again."

He had spoken, and he could not recall the words, he could only look with parted lips at her. For the first instant she did not seem to understand, there was a vacant, bewildered expression on her face; then there came a sudden change, and she put out her hands in a trembling, shrinking way.

"Oh, don't, don't, please," she said.

She passed him, and went on into the house.

Holbis stood still by the door for a full minute after she had gone, his strong lips working strangely as he stood. Then he, too, went upstairs, up to his own room, and bolted the door. He had an appointment to keep with some friends, but he knew that would be impossible now. He lay down, face downwards, on the bed, as he had done once before, with his head upon his arms, seeing still her shrinking movement in the darkness, yet not moving, not uttering a sound himself, save that now and then he

gave a long, low moan as if he were in pain.

We all know what would be the result if a strong man were to take a butterfly into the palm of his hand, and holding so the beautiful fragile thing were to let his strong grasp close upon it there. We see that scene sometimes, too, in life. And sometimes in that case the story is reversed, and it is the butterflies who crush the men.

## CHAPTER XV.

AND now once more I see these two together—Meg and Holbis, standing side by side in the unlet parlour, through whose blindless windows come on them the pale gleams of a January sun. Two long months have passed—months that have left hard traces upon both. But the time of waiting is now drawing to a close.

“It’s no good hesitating,” said Holbis—he was very pale, and his breath came and went as if held and quickened by some mortal struggle—“you may as well make up your mind to it all at once. I know where you come from, and so does Mrs. Gay and all of us here now. If it wasn’t for me Mrs. Gay would be claiming that reward to-night—and it’s mine, it’s I have found it out, and all else about you too. If you want to go back to your fine relations and friends, you’d better do so, that’s all I say. But if not”—and here he paused.

"I can't tell you more than I've done this night," he said, with a curious sound of breaking in his voice. "You ought to know by this time all that I'm always ready to do for you. You say you're not happy in your home, that you wouldn't care to go back there even if it were to save your life. You needn't now. It's no good for you to try and get your living, and it never would be, however much you tried. If you were to marry me you would never need at all to work again. I could give you as comfortable a home as anyone could wish, I'd work to bones sooner than you shouldn't have everything you want. You needn't be afraid of your relations then, or of hunger, or of any man at all. I'd stand by you with my life against the world. Ever since the first day I first set eyes on you in the street I've always had this thought for you."

"You've been trying to get me all these months," cried Meg passionately, and yet with the passion that is forced to utterance by overmastering fear and dread. "There's not a thing that you could do that you

haven't tried for me. It isn't right of you, indeed it's not. You might have thought . . . I was alone . . .” and here she stopped.

“Do you wish to go back to your friends?” asked Holbis, his dark eyes looking straight at her.

“No—no.”

“They why can't you come to me?”

Silence, and then Meg spoke, more feebly now —

“Will you make me go back if I don't do all you wish?”

“I will go to them at once, to-night.”

“It's not—right” — and then she cried.

“And you think it's right, then, for you to be staying without any protection here? I tell you that you don't know all the harm it is. And it's not every man that would offer to marry you as I do now—and you need never go back to your relations then.”

Her uncle's home, her uncle's home again! Why did he touch that one sore thought that seemed to be beneath all things, always vibrating in her heart. She drew a little

away from him, and drooped her head to think. Then she raised her head and spoke.

"Give me till to-night," she said quietly. "I will give you an answer then."

She moved towards the door, but Holbis was quicker than she was. Standing with his back to it, and with sudden fierce passion gleaming in his eyes, he spoke to her again.

"Oh, I know what this means," he said in a harsher, quicker voice. "There's no good in your trying to deceive yourself and me. You will get out of our reach—us that rely on your promise to get back to us—and on some sudden fancy you will run away from us, and we shall never hear of you again. You don't know what's best for you, mistress, when you try these tricks on me."

Meg gave a little shiver, as if some sudden dread had seized her, and drooped her head. For a while she was silent, standing looking on the ground. Her voice was choked, and trembling, when at last she spoke.

"If I don't do what you wish" —



Suddenly stopping herself she raised her head, and looked with her blue eyes at him. Her voice was steady now, simple and childish as her glance, with a pathetic question in her tone.

“Will you hurt me?”

“*Hurt you?*” and then for a long time there was silence.

“You don’t know me at all,” he cried, “and you don’t know how much I care for you. I couldn’t hurt you; if the worst were to come, and you were to leave me all alone, I couldn’t hurt you then. It wouldn’t be you that I should wish to hurt. There’s not one of all the pretty hairs upon your head that wouldn’t be always safe with me.”

Again silence, and then Meg spoke, with a voice as steady and quiet as her glance.

“If you will let me go away now I will come back to-night, and tell you what I mean to do.”

He gave no answer, only moved away, and she went to the door. As she reached it she turned her head, and looked back at him—a

sad, strange, wistful glance—and then she went.

He went up to his room, dragged a low chair close to the window, and sat down there, looking out on the yard and on the poplars, his hands clenched under his chin, and his strong knees pressed hard against the wall. So he sat without moving, whilst hour after hour passed by, whilst the lengthened shadow of the yard wall fell across the snow, whilst the sun sank low behind the poplars, and the winter afternoon darkened slowly towards the night. No thought of work or movement was in his mind—scarcely any thought at all—and yet no one could have seen his face without imagining an inward conflict there.

If he had all his life been self-governed and self-restrained, if his purpose had been as unselfish as it was strong, if that one haunting darker secret had not possessed his past, that afternoon of waiting might have had some hope for him. It had not; he scarcely thought of happiness at all—

only as he sat looking out on the gathering darkness of the winter evening in that dreaming state that much agitation can produce, it was to him as if some dark river were flowing on and on, carrying them onwards to an unknown shore. And still the grasp of his hands never relaxed an instant, and it seemed to him that his hold was on her still.

The sun sank red behind the poplars, the winter afternoon darkened towards the night, a low wind rose and sighed restlessly amongst the trees, whilst in the distance shone out the light of the town. But Meg had not yet returned.

And Meg had wandered far out into the country, walking fast and aimlessly as we do under the grasp of an excitement that will not leave us power to guide our steps. She had wandered through the roads and down the lanes, into fields covered with snow where it was hard to tread, even into woods clogged with snow and brushwood, through which she could scarcely force her way. Once

after crossing a field, she found a little brook, dark and deep with winter blackness against the snow. A great bough hung over it, and she had clambered on to that, hanging on as she could, and laughing at herself whilst her feet hung downwards towards the stream. (Perhaps when we most feel that our childish hours have passed, there comes most on us the longing to be as a child again.) She got down at last, wandered back to the road, and then wandered on. The road was very lonely, and she had dim remembrances afterwards that when she was quite alone she had lain down now and again upon the ground, stretching her arms out over the snow and the stones—but she had always risen up again and wandered onwards still. The afternoon grew chill and dark, and slowly the evening came—the time she had allowed herself for choosing was passing fast. What had her thoughts been all this while?

It is a strange and terrible saying, but not less strange than true, that our very repugnance towards an event can make its

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charm; there is a fascination in peril that we have not always strength or courage to resist. It was so then with her. The distrust, the loathing even, with which the thought of her marriage came, were like a spell to draw her towards it; it seemed to her as if she were struggling against too strong a current; it would be easier to give up all at once, to throw herself into the wishes of Holbis, and so be lost. And then against this came the reaction too—he had always done what he liked with her; she would not in this one greatest thing blindly submit herself to him.

Her uncle's home! again and ever, her uncle's home; it was strange how the thought of that would always return at last. And no thought of penitence, of tenderness, of a welcome long delayed, but given now at last, came with that thought to her. He had been advertising, so Holbis said; then he had not forgotten her, as she had feared, but no doubt he thought it his duty to do as much as that. It would be his duty

also to give her a harsh greeting when she returned; he would see to it, no doubt, that she should be well punished for her fault. And her cousins, too; she pressed her nails into her palms as she thought of them, how often after she had returned they would tell her that, during all the time of her absence, they had never once so much as wished for her. They would have such opportunities now whenever they wished to speak. And then she spoke out loud to the frosty air, and told it that she would never go back to them again.

She had just said this when there came all at once across her mind, almost before her eyes, the thought of a little bed there was in the nursery "at home"—a cot-bed in the long, low nursery in which she had slept when she first came as a child to them. It came to her with a pang to think that if she entirely gave up her old life she would never see that little cot again.

And then came other thoughts, humiliating, vain, and yet with some power too. Through

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all those wretched months she had buoyed herself up with desperate hope that in some way or other she would win success at last: she would prove her right to have escaped, and force a hard-earned praise or even envy at length from her uncle's home. Now—now—if she married, and married one whom they would count her inferior in birth and rank, she would have given up all such dreams of success indeed, she would have degraded herself for ever in their eyes, and would have sunk for life into that station into which she had escaped. For one moment she stood still and that thought seemed to scorch her as she stood.

Yet—yet—with the remembrance of his words the quick reaction came. Oh, what was the good of even trying to succeed—she could not! The misery of the last few months was proof enough of that. And dangers were round her, and starvation, and poverty, and this would mean safety at least from them. Oh, what did their words signify, or her birth, or the sudden reproachful re-

membrance of her dead father, and of all he might have hoped for her? These things were dead, and one thing, stronger than they were, was living still—she had still the power to give herself to this man who loved her—loved—

And then as the remembrance of all the fierce dreaded intensity of that love came back upon her mind, she fell down upon her knees upon the path, beneath a little thorn-bush, whose bare branches were laden and trembling with the snow. “Oh God, help me,” she cried, without well knowing what she said.

Was that prayer heard?

She rose up when she had spoken, in that state of mental stupor that often succeeds a moment of great agitation, and began to retrace her steps towards the town, slowly and wearily, as if her brain were now too stunned to think. It was getting very dark, the night would be upon her before the town was reached. Still she was not afraid, it seemed as if she were too much fatigued even for terror now.

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So walking slowly through the increasing gloom of the evening, she reached the lights of the town at last.

It was very cold, and standing under the light of a gas-lamp, she found that she was tired and stiff, and that her aching limbs almost demanded rest. A dread was on her, too, of Mrs. Gay's house, of the loud voices and laughter in the kitchen, of that one terror of decision that rested there. It seemed to her that she might still allow herself a few minutes in which to rest and wait. On one side the lights of the nearest station shone brightly through the darkness, speaking like an invitation of lights and waiting-room fires, and the footsteps of many people. Without staying to think, she turned towards the place.

The train had just come in, and the platform was crowded when she reached it. But at a little distance she could see a gleaming reflection of firelight from the waiting-room, and still without thinking she pressed her way towards it through the rest. A sudden

movement of the crowd almost threw her against a tall gentleman, who was going in the same direction as herself, and with the instinct that prompts us to look at anyone we have touched, she turned round towards him, and their eyes met. It was Mr. Arlathnot.

END OF VOL. I.















